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**Work well-being of young adults in different  
phases of the Covid-19 pandemic**

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**ABSTRACT:**

The aim of this Master's thesis is to explore the work well-being of young adults during different phases of the Covid-19 pandemic and to study how the changes in young adult's lives caused by the pandemic have affected their needs for the management of work well-being after the pandemic has subsided. The purpose of the study is to respond to the research gap that has arisen due to the unprecedented changes that happened in the work environment, and their impact on the work well-being of young adults needs to be understood to ensure sustainable, proactive, and adaptive management of work well-being of young adults in the post-pandemic era.

In the theoretical framework of the study, work well-being is examined based on the resources of employees and the demands of their work, and how changes in these aspects have both positive and negative effects on work well-being. In this thesis, the pandemic is studied in phases from the work well-being perspective, starting from its outbreak and progressing to the post-pandemic period. The decisions that were made quickly to manage the infectiousness of the disease have led to abrupt changes in work environments. These rapid changes may have caused harm to the work well-being of young adults.

It is possible that the work well-being of young adults is also influenced by their personal experiences before entering working life. Changes that occur during the transition from youth to adulthood can have a lifelong impact on individuals. The global pandemic, Covid-19, has affected the lives of young adults in every area; consumed their resources, and created new demands on their work.

For the purpose of this research, nine young adults were interviewed to understand how the different phases of the pandemic have affected their work well-being, the challenges they feel that there are in the management of work well-being, and what companies should consider when developing solutions.

Based on the conducted research, it could be beneficial for companies to focus on long-term solutions when planning the management of work well-being. The work well-being of young adults can be supported in the post-pandemic era by listening to employees, adapting practices and approaches, and finding new ways to support the current and future resources of employees.

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**KEYWORDS:** work wellbeing, Covid-19, young adults, new normal

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**VAASAN YLIOPISTO****Johtamisen yksikkö**

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**TIIVISTELMÄ:**

Tämän Pro Gradu -tutkielman tavoitteena on perehtyä nuorten aikuisten työhyvinvointiin Covid-19 -pandemian eri vaiheissa, ja tutkia miten pandemiasta aiheutuneet muutokset nuorten aikuisten elämässä ovat vaikuttaneet heidän tarpeisiinsa työhyvinvoinnin johtamiseen pandemian laannuttua. Aiheella on tutkimusarvoa, sillä työelämässä tapahtuneet muutokset ovat olleet ennennäkemättömiä ja niiden vaikutukset nuorten aikuisten työhyvinvoinnille on ymmärrettävä, jotta nuorten aikuisten työhyvinvoinnin johtaminen on kestävä, ennakoivaa ja mukautuvaa pandemian jälkeisessä ajassa.

Tutkimuksen teoreettisessa viitekehysessä työhyvinvointia käsitellään työntekijän resurssien ja työn vaatimusten pohjalta, ja miten niiden muutoksilla on positiivisia sekä negatiivisia vaikutuksia työhyvinvointiin. Pandemiaan perehdytään vaiheittain työhyvinvoinnin näkökulmasta, alkaen pandemian puhkeamisesta edeten sen jälkeiseen vaiheeseen. Taudin tartuttavuuden hillitsemisen vuoksi tehdyt nopeat ratkaisut ovat johtaneet äkkinäisiin muutoksiin työympäristöissä. Muutosten tapahtuessa nopealla tahdilla on voinut olla mahdollista, että niistä on aiheutunut haittaa nuorten aikuisten työhyvinvoinnille.

On mahdollista, että nuorten aikuisten työhyvinvointiin vaikuttavat myös heidän henkilökohtaiset kokemuksensa ennen työelämään siirtymistä. Muutokset, jotka tapahtuvat nuoruuden ja aikuisuuden välimaastossa saattavat vaikuttaa ihmiseen läpi elämän. Globaali pandemia, Covid-19, on vaikuttanut nuorten aikuisten elämään jokaisella osa-alueella; kuluttanut resursseja sekä aiheuttanut uusia vaatimuksia työntekoon.

Tutkimusta varten on haastateltu yhdeksää nuorta aikuista, jotka ovat kertoneet miten pandemian eri vaiheet ovat vaikuttaneet heidän työhyvinvointiinsa ja millaisia haasteita työhyvinvoinnin johtamisessa on heidän näkökulmastaan, sekä mihin yritysten tulisi kiinnittää huomiota kehitteessään ratkaisuja.

Tehdyn tutkimuksen perusteella yritysten olisi kannattavaa keskittyä pitkäaikaisiin ratkaisuihin suunnitellessaan työhyvinvoinnin johtamista. Nuorten aikuisten jaksamiseen pandemian jälkeisessä ajassa voidaan vaikuttaa kuuntelemalla työntekijöitä, joustamalla käytänteissä ja tavoissa sekä löytämällä uusia keinoja tukea työntekijöiden nykyisiä ja tulevia resursseja.

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## 1 Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has been challenging the well-being of countless people globally, since 2020. The period of social distancing emptied the offices, classrooms, and public spaces and moved the people into their own homes. Working remotely has made it difficult for people to take time off or set boundaries between working life and private life (Threlkeld, 2021). Another thing challenging the boundaries between working and personal life is the technology that makes work accessible anywhere at any time. People have been resilient while coping with the changes that the pandemic introduced into daily life, however being resilient for too long is another way to challenge work well-being (Parmar, 2021).

The lives of young people were challenged by the pandemic, disturbing their education, training, and employment, making it more difficult for them to get employed, continue with education, and risking their development on their career paths (ILO, 2022, p. 3). Youth labor markets are not recovering at the same pace as the labor market for older workers. A study shows how the earnings of a young person, who enters the job market during a major economic downturn, can be lower than average for many years (Council et al., 2014, p. 125).

It is important to study how the demands and resources of work for young adults evolved during the phases of the pandemic in order to understand how to manage their well-being according to their current needs. Young adults are an important group to acknowledge when discussing work well-being since they have a long career ahead of them and they are more likely to compare themselves with others, be prone to perfectionism, or become workaholics, while simultaneously facing higher expectations at workplaces as newcomers (Curran & Hill, 2019, pp. 419-421; Innanen et al., 2014; Ilmarinen, 2009, p. 3; Patrick et al., 2004). In addition, studies have shown how after the pandemic phase started, Generation Z has struggled with work-life balance and exhaustion more than other generations (Microsoft, 2021, p. 11).

Due to the economic problems that the pandemic brought for organizations, taking care of employees' work well-being and thereby preventing and reducing the lost productivity- and absence costs, could be crucial (Brüssow & Timmis, 2021, pp. 4085-4086; Hesketh & Cooper, 2014). Organizations are making investments in their future when they attempt to change the work environment with protective and preventive manners (Quick & Henderson, 2016). Paying attention to the work demands of the employees and providing them with resources that help them cope better with the uncertainty and demands of their work, could be beneficial. Employers should be interested in ensuring that the company's vision aligns with their employees' preferences and values, creating high-quality manager-employee relationships, and updating the design of the workspace if necessary (O'Donnell et al., 2019, p. 1555). When employees are well-being in their work, they can be more committed to their jobs, and be more productive and the number of sick leaves reduces (International Labour Organization, 1996-2022).

Covid-19 was declared a pandemic in March 2020 and currently, this thesis is being written in 2023 (World Health Organization, 2020). Because time has passed from the start of the pandemic, naturally the pandemic has developed over time. In this thesis the discussion around the Covid-19 pandemic has been divided into three phases, that are according to the World Health Organization's (WHO) (2009) defined pandemic phases: the pandemic phase; the acute stage of the virus, the post-peak period; when the pandemic seems to be decreasing but there is uncertainty regarding additional waves and countries need to be prepared for those, and lastly, the post-pandemic period; where the disease activity levels and the behavior of the virus are comparable to a seasonal influenza virus.

Work well-being and workability are essentially linked together, both having an impact on the other. To maintain their workability, employees are balancing their work and personal resources (Ilmarinen, 2009, p. 2). Since resources appear to be an integral part of the development of work well-being, the theoretical framework to support this study consists of the Job Demands-Resources -model and Conservation of Resources -theory.

Both these theories discuss the impacts of resources and their lack of on the work well-being of employees.

It is more and more important to acknowledge how to manage the work well-being of young adults when so many changes have taken place, and the end for changes is not visible. The consequences of the pandemic are still affecting the lives of young people, simultaneously new challenges, such as rising prices for food and energy, have emerged due to the conflicts taking place in Ukraine and elsewhere (ILO, 2022, p. 3). Studies concerning work well-being and Covid-19 exist already, but there exists a research gap in studies focusing on the work well-being of young adults, impacted by Covid-19. Previous studies state that there should be more studies focusing on young people, their employment, and work-related stressors since there are rapid shifts taking place in the global labor market (Law et al., 2020, p. 620).

### **1.1 Research question and objectives of the study**

This study aims to expand the understanding of the evolvement of work well-being of young adults in different stages of the Covid-19 pandemic and the management of their work well-being during the pandemic, and how to manage it in the post-pandemic times. Therefore, the research question this study seeks to answer is the following:

How has the work wellbeing of young adults evolved during the Covid-19 pandemic and how can it be managed in the post-pandemic era?

The objectives of the study are designed to help answer the research question:

- How has work well-being evolved during the stages of Covid-19 among young adults?
- How can the challenges of work well-being be managed from the point of view of young adults?

## **1.2 Definitions of the key concepts**

Key concepts in this thesis are work well-being, Covid-19, young adults, and management of work well-being. In this chapter, short definitions of these key concepts are given to help the reader understand the point of view from which the thesis is written.

### **Work well-being**

According to the International Labour Organization (1996-2022), “Workplace Wellbeing relates to all aspects of working life, from the quality and safety of the physical environment, to how workers feel about their work, their working environment, the climate at work and work organization”. In addition, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health (n.d) defines how well-being at work includes that work is safe, healthy, and pleasant for the employees.

### **COVID-19**

On the 11<sup>th</sup> of March, 2020 the World Health Organization characterized the COVID-19 as a pandemic (World Health Organization, 2020). According to WHO, it is the first pandemic that is caused by the coronavirus. Most people infected with COVID-19 experience mild respiratory illness, but some become seriously ill, and might even die at any age (World Health Organization, 2022). People living with other medical conditions, as well as older people, are at a bigger risk to develop serious illness.

### **Young adults**

Generation Z is born between the years 1997 and 2012, and Millennials are born between the years 1981 and 1996 (Dimock, 2019, p. 4). The youngest people from Generation Z are currently 11-year-olds, and the oldest people from Generation Y, also known as Millennials, are 42-year-olds. However, the definition of young adults consists of people aged from 18 to 25 years old (Simpson, 2018).

**Management of work well-being**

According to International Labour Organization (ILO) (1996-2022), all aspects of working life link to work well-being; the working environment, the atmosphere at work, feelings related to the work, also the safety and quality of the physical work environment. Management of work well-being is making sure that these aspects are taken care of and kept up to date in the changing work environments. The process of managing workplace well-being could include a focus on learning and development, as well as on leadership and communication (International Labour Organization, 1996-2022).

**1.3 Structure of the thesis**

This study is divided into six chapters. The first chapter presents the research background, the research question, and the objectives. Following with the theoretical framework, which is divided into two chapters: well-being at work, and Covid-19 from the work well-being perspective. After the literature review, the methodological choices of the research are outlined in the fourth chapter. The findings of the research are presented in the fifth chapter. Finally, in the sixth chapter, the findings are discussed together with previous research, and conclusions and practical implications of the study are given. Also, the limitations of the research and suggestions for future research are presented in the sixth chapter.

## **2 Well-being at work**

Work well-being is a wide concept that can be discussed from different angles and regarding different matters. In Finland, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health defines work well-being as in relation to safe, healthy, and pleasant work. Employers need to ensure their employees' safe work environment, good management, and fair treatment. Moreover, individual factors of employee well-being are "life satisfaction, interpersonal relationship, self-affirmation, and physical and mental health" (Gadhavi et al., 2021, p. 7). Even so, the focus of this thesis is on the occupational factors of work well-being, such as the demands and resources of work in young adults' lives.

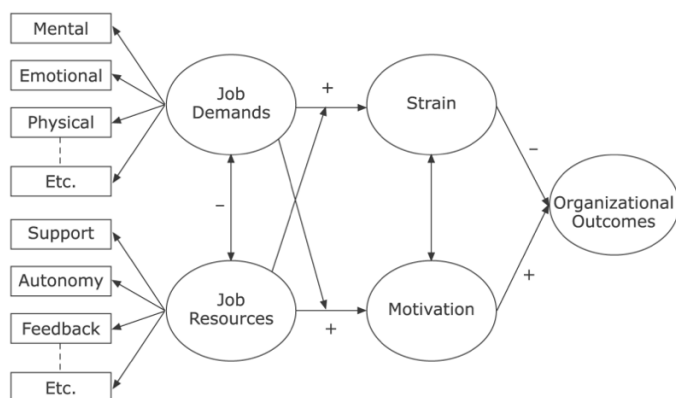
Well-being at work is a concept that develops over time as the work environment and society change. Especially, the Covid-19 pandemic brought many considerable changes in a short time to the workplaces. In this thesis, work well-being is discussed keeping the young adults on focus. It is in the interest of companies to determine proactive and beneficial measures, in order to update their processes and develop work well-being of their young employees.

Work well-being can be viewed from two perspectives: either by the factors that positively or negatively impact work well-being. In the following subchapters, these perspectives are better introduced through the Job Demands-Resources model and Conservation of Resources -theory.

### **2.1 Job Demands-Resources model**

In order to understand better the formation of work well-being and how it can be influenced, this chapter introduces the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model. The idea of the JD-R model is that working conditions can be divided into demands and resources (Demerouti et al., 2001). The model can be utilized in many occupations, and it can be adopted to improve the well-being and performance of employees (Bakker & Demerouti,

2007, p. 310). In this model, work characteristics have either a positive or negative impact on health and well-being (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007, p. 310; Eurofound, 2018). The JD-R model is presented in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** The Job Demands-Resources model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007, p. 313).

Job resources are physical, psychological, social, or organizational aspects of a job that can: “(a) be functional in achieving work goals; (b) reduce job demands at the associated physiological and psychological costs; (c) stimulate personal growth and development.” (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007, p. 312; Demerouti et al., 2001). Job resources are linked to the level of motivation and they may buffer employees from the effect of job demands (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007, pp. 314-320). Job demands are physical, social, or organizational prospects of a job that requires physical or mental work (Demerouti et al., 2001). High job demands, such as work overload, time pressure, and reduced job control, can cause job strain (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007, p. 310).

Moreover, resources can be divided into internal and external resources, and this study focuses mostly on the external ones, which are organizational and social resources (Demerouti et al., 2001). The condition of external resources can be influenced by taking them into account at the management level of the company. While organizational resources contain participation in decision-making, job control, and task variety, social resources include support from family and networks at work. Such external resources are needed to support employees in coping with the work demands. If the demands of the

work are higher than the resources that help to cope with the work, then employees are overtaxed. This can lead to withdrawing from their work or if there is no change in either demands or resources, employees might start to feel exhausted. If employees do not have the resources to ease their coping with the demands, thereby the lack of resources and daily struggles with the demands can cause damage to their health (Hobfoll, 2002, p. 319). In this thesis, an internal resource: motivation for work, is also taken into consideration. The second premise of the JD-R model suggests that two underlying psychological processes influence the development of motivation and job strain (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007, pp. 313-314). These processes are the motivational process and the health impairment process.

### **2.1.1 Motivational process**

The motivational process means that it is presumed that job resources possess “motivational potential and lead to high work engagement, low cynicism, and excellent performance” (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007, p. 313). The presence of job resources, such as feedback from superiors or social support from colleagues, is linked to work engagement and the level of motivation. When the amount of job resources is high, the level of demands does not have an impact on exhaustion or vigor (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007, p. 314). The resources of a job can work as a buffer against the strain of the job, which is caused by the job demands.

### **2.1.2 Health impairment process**

In the health impairment process, the focus shifts to the job demands. There are demands in every job, however, an unreasonable amount of demands can lead to distress and activate the health impairment process (de Beer et al., 2016, p. 388). In the health impairment process, work overload or emotional demands of the work can exhaust the mental and physical resources of employees, and lead to a state of exhaustion and create issues with their health (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007, p. 313). Through research conducted

on the health impairment process, important insights into employee health and motivation, and organizational outcomes, such as “absenteeism, lack of job satisfaction, reduced commitment, turnover intention, psychological ill-health symptoms, and physical ill-health conditions” are found (de Beer et al., 2016, p. 387).

## **2.2 Conservation of Resources -theory**

Another relevant theory, that helps to gain a deeper understanding of the resources and their lack of, impacting work well-being is the Conservation of Resources (COR) -theory. The COR-theory presumes that “people seek to obtain, retain, and protect resources and that stress occurs when resources are threatened with loss or lost or when individuals fail to gain resources after substantive resource investment” (Hobfoll, 2002, p. 312). Resources can be objects, conditions, and other things that people value; the value of resources is linked individually to personal experiences and situations (Halbesleben et al., 2014, p. 1355). In summary, the main idea of the COR-theory is that people want to protect their current resources (conservation) and acquire new ones (acquisition) (Halbesleben et al., 2014, p. 1335). There are two main principles of the theory; the primacy of resource loss and resource investment.

### **2.2.1 The primacy of resource loss**

The idea of resource loss is how losing resources is mentally more harmful, than the benefit of regaining resources that have once been lost (Halbesleben et al., 2014, p. 1335). Resource loss is an essential part of experiencing stress and as resources can be a fundamental part of people’s stress resistance, thereby the loss of them can lead to resource loss cycles (Hobfoll, 2002, p. 312). Resource losses can have an impact on job satisfaction, motivation, job performance, and on abusiveness toward colleagues (Halbesleben et al., 2014, p. 1336). COR-theory assumes that after experiencing resource loss, gaining resources and the positive feelings related to it will become more important

(Hobfoll, 2002, p. 312). Loss of certain resources is related to aging, such as the risk of losing loved ones or a promotion to a prized role, which increases with age. Therefore, when employees are aging it is important to reallocate their resources in order to prepare for possible future resource losses.

### **2.2.2 Resource investment**

Regarding resource investment the idea is to “protect against resource loss, to recover from losses, and to gain resources” (Halbesleben et al., 2014, p. 1336). Investment in resources is utilized as a coping mechanism to prevent future resource losses. People who have more resources might cope better in stressful situations, while those who do not have as many resources can begin to chronically suffer from challenging circumstances (Hobfoll, 2002, p. 319). People might try to anticipate their future resources and challenges, and therefore allocate their resources toward the imagined developing challenge (Hobfoll, 2002, p. 315). This kind of anticipation could be risky if future threats are misinterpreted, then the applied resources might not be available in the future if needed. However, if people succeed to cope in their challenging circumstances, they might gain resources by focusing on identifying and organizing their current resources (Hobfoll, 2002, p. 315).

### **2.3 Specifics of the well-being experience of young adults**

As young adults are important for “the nation’s workforce, global competitiveness, public safety, national security, and because many are parents, to the healthy development and well-being of the next generation” their well-being is essential for the whole society (Stroud et al., 2015, p. 128). Therefore, trying to understand more of their well-being experience than just the resources and demands of the work is interesting. Instances that take place during young adulthood are integral to long-term socioeconomic trajectories (Council et al., 2014, p. 124). Moreover, a poor start to working life is linked with

direct and long-term personal, social, and economic consequences (van Schaijk et al., 2020). Simultaneously, young adults are adaptable and resilient but also struggle with economic security, employment, and well-being (Council, et al., p. 6).

Furthermore, circumstances before entering the working world might be overwhelming for some young adults. For example, university students near their graduation stress over their academic responsibilities, future work opportunities, finances, and poor work/school-life balance (El-Ghoroury et al., 2012, p. 127). Moreover, the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the work well-being of young adults can be noticed; Generation Z struggles with work-life balance and job strain more than other generations (Threlkeld, 2021; Microsoft, 2021, p. 11). As mentioned before, influential situations that have happened during young adulthood can have an impact on the lives of young adults in the long term, while these experiences that have occurred in the transition phase from studies to the working world might impact their work well-being, it is also important to discuss the work-related demands that might be affecting the workability of young adults.

### **2.3.1 Experiences during studies**

As the stage of employees' work well-being can be invisible to employers, it is important to acknowledge how the earlier experiences, on which the workplace has not had an impact, can be causing harm to the employees. An essential part of young adulthood is experienced at schools and universities, therefore circumstances that have taken place before entering the working world are discussed in this chapter. After learning more about the invisible factors, organizations can improve on managing their employees' well-being.

According to research, different levels of social optimism, social withdrawal, and social handicapping during university studies have an impact on the level of work exhaustion or job strain in an early career (Salmela-Aro et al., 2011, p. 153). Hence, the higher the initial level of social optimism, and the bigger its increase during university studies, the

lower the level of early career exhaustion would be. Also, when the level of social withdrawal and social handicapping is lower, and the increase during studies is smaller, then the level of early career work exhaustion seems to be lower. Moreover, the level of dysfunctional social behaviors such as pessimism, social avoidance, and withdrawal adopted during university studies, is related to a higher level of early career experiences of burnout.

Young adults can experience strain and health impairment during their studies. Among students in higher education, the syndrome of academic burnout is recognized by the symptoms of emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and decreased sense of personal accomplishment (Shankland et al., 2018, p. 93). Students have assignments and classes mixed in with their personal lives, and if these cause too much stress it can lead them to feel emotional exhaustion. Personal demands that students set for themselves might influence their perception of a demanding situation (Zeijen et al., 2021). Moreover, feeling emotionally exhausted can make the students distance themselves from others. This kind of loss of resources could be a beginning of a loss cycle (Hobfoll, 2002, p. 312).

In addition, highly competitive learning environments affect the well-being of students negatively (Nordmo & Samara, 2009, p. 256). Such competitive environments can be challenging for people with a tendency to social comparison. Thus, the practiced social comparison could negatively influence the work well-being of young adults. Individuals who have higher contingent self-esteem, meaning that they base their self-worth on the approvals of others, are more interested in meeting standards or expectations (Patrick et al., 2004, pp. 501-514). Since these individuals wish to meet expectations, they are likely to pick individuals whom they consider to be superior to themselves, and to whose situation they can compare their own. This can lead to false predictions and not-true comparisons that can be problematic for mental well-being. Moreover, this kind of behavior might be draining the mental resources of a person.

Social comparison can be up- or downward identification or contrast (Carmona et al., 2006, pp. 86-94). People focus on the similarities when they practice identification and try to find relatable characteristics, good or bad, from others. Up- or downward contrast means that they are looking for the differences between themselves and the others whom they are comparing themselves to. Research shows how upward contrast and downward identification are in relation to experiencing job strain. Meaning that when comparing oneself to others, it is harmful to seek differences between oneself and those individuals whom one considers as better-than-oneself and look for similarities between oneself and those who are doing worse. This might impact the motivation process regarding work negatively (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007, p. 313).

People who are high in job strain can be envious and frustrated when they are in contact with others who are “doing better” than them (Carmona et al., 2006, p. 87). These interactions can increase the feelings of being a failure and inefficient. When exhausted people identify themselves with others who are in a worse situation than them, they can worsen their condition. Buunk et al. (2001) argue that “the higher the level of burnout, the less positive affect upward comparisons generated”, and they could even cause a negative impact. If people who are not doing well can identify themselves with others who are doing better than them, this could help reduce the feeling of job strain over time through the inspiration that the upward identification could bring (Carmona et al., 2006, p. 87).

### **2.3.2 Impact of early career work demands and outcomes**

Young adults at the beginning of their careers might struggle with adjusting to the new circumstances and thereby, the risk of becoming burned out is challenging their well-being experience (Villa & Chong, 2021). LinkedIn Senior Editor-at-Large, George Anders, shares how the beginning phase of new jobs has been confusing for Generation Z and for others who are just starting their careers, due to the changes in onboarding, networking, and training caused by the pandemic (Microsoft, 2021, p. 12). Members of

Generation Z starting their careers are important to their workplaces since they bring their fresh point-of-views and challenge the existing status quo (Microsoft, 2021, p. 12). Workplaces are described to have increasing workloads, fewer staff and higher expectations for their employees entering a workplace with high job demands does not seem like an idealistic starting point for a career, when the newcomer might not have enough job resources to buffer the increasing demands (Hesketh & Cooper, 2014; Bakker & Demerouti, 2007, pp. 314-320).

Both work well-being and workability have an impact on the other and thereby these are essentially linked together. According to Ilmarinen (2009, p. 3), young adults need special attention for their workability. This is due to their position as a minority of the workforce, and because newcomers face high expectations from their employers. Workability is about the balance between work and personal resources, and certain matters such as high job control, supportive organizational climate, and young age, can be predictors for a positive improvement of workability. These resources can work as a buffer against the demands of the job and as improvers for work motivation, as well as work engagement and performance levels (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007, pp. 314-320).

According to a study, work-related demands, such as high job demands, low job control, effort-reward imbalance, lack of reward, working overtime, and high job insecurity, have negative impacts on the mental well-being of young adults (Law et al., 2020, p. 619). Another study states how the relationship between stress and workability is linked when the demands of work spill over into private life (van Schaaik et al., 2020). Bakker & Demerouti (2007, pp. 310-313) stated how high job demands and reduced job control together, can cause job strain and impact the health impairment process. In addition, according to Law et al. (2020, p. 611), young workers are more likely to experience job strain and unemployment than older workers. Moreover, young adults are more vulnerable to conflicts with managers and colleagues, and workplace bullying, and face greater inequity in their treatment at the workplace than older workers.

In order to prevent declines in workability, employers and employees should discuss and set boundaries to improve the work-life balance (van Schaaik et al., 2020). Boundaries regarding accessibility outside working hours, or a plan considering workplace autonomy or social support, could be effective ways to prevent work demands from impacting private life.

Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge how college students nowadays are demanding more from themselves, and aiming for perfection more than previous generations, according to a study conducted by Curran & Hill (2019, pp. 419-421). This rise in perfectionism might be due to the increase in competitiveness, individualism, and parental practices that have turned more anxious and controlling. Recent generations of college students are setting more demanding and unrealistic standards for their surroundings and for others, than before. When business graduates, who have already experienced exhaustion and issues with their health impairment and well-being during their studies, enter working life, they are at a higher risk of experiencing job strain. This change that has formed over time could be one explanation for the increased mental health difficulties that young people have been suffering. Moreover, employees who set higher demands for their performance possibly perceive their work as highly demanding, in comparison to people who do not set their personal demands as high (Zeijen et al., 2021).

In general, people who are exposed in working life to psychosocial risks such as long working hours, emotional demands, high work intensity, and low level of autonomy are at a higher risk of burnout (Eurofound, 2018, p. 1). These high job demands at the beginning of a young adult's career can weaken the motivational process, cause job strain and health impairment process if they lack resources to support their well-being and buffer the impact of the demands (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007, pp. 310-313). According to Innanen et al. (2014), young highly educated employees, who are at the beginning of their careers can experience high levels of workaholism. Considering the high job demands and how their previous experiences might impact their ability to cope with

demands, the higher possibility of experiencing workaholism for young adults is not unpredictable. When moving forward in their careers, they might experience less workaholism due to their work experience and education but continue to possibly experience job strain (Innanen et al., 2014).

While the global economy is slowly recovering from the economic drawbacks that were caused by the pandemic and Russia's invasion to Ukraine, young adults are dealing with inflation, the cost-of-living crisis, and high interest rates of student loans (Gourinchas, 2023; Bank of Finland, 2023; Yle News, 2023). According to Yle News (2023), inflation is hitting young adults the hardest due to the rising housing interest rates. At the same time, young adults are paying off their student loans, which are more expensive now because of the increased interest rates. In January 2022 the average interest rate was 0.09%, one year later in January 2023, the average interest rate had increased to 2.24% (Bank of Finland, 2023). Financial stressors can lead to young adults starting to work during their studies to avoid taking expensive student loans. Experiencing financial uncertainty during young adulthood is normal, but the recent economic environment has made it difficult for young adults to create financial stability. Young employees' work well-being can be suffering from their personal stress over their own financial situation.

### **3 Covid-19 from the work well-being perspective**

Currently, when writing this thesis, it has been three years since, the first cases of coronavirus, “an infectious disease caused by the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) virus”, emerged in Wuhan, China in December 2019 (WHO, 2022a; Crook et al., 2021). On January 30<sup>th</sup>, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) announced the virus as a “Public Health Emergency of International Concern” and later on March 11<sup>th</sup>, 2020, Covid-19 was declared a pandemic (WHO, 2022a; WHO, 2020). According to research, globalization and modernization have enabled the Covid crisis to emerge (Lupton & Willis, 2021, p. 20). The disease can be asymptomatic or fatal, and sometimes people have longer-term consequences from the infection, in such situation it is called ‘long covid’ (Crook et al., 2021, p.1; Brüssow & Timmis, 2021, p. 4077).

Impacting the lives of countless people globally, the pandemic has put the work environment through changes. The pandemic-related reformations have required employees to utilize their resources to cope with the changes. For some people, this may lead to feelings of exhaustion, job strain, or activation of a health impairment process, that are challenging the work well-being (de Beer et al., 2016, p. 388; Bakker & Demerouti, 2007, p. 310). The Covid-19 pandemic has been a significant event in the lives of young adults, impacting their studies, training, and employment as well as different aspects of their personal lives (ILO, 2022, p. 3). Therefore, it is important to put focus on the work well-being of young adults, in order to support them with their motivational process, current job resources, and gains of new resource investments (Halbesleben et al., 2014, p. 1336; Bakker & Demerouti, 2007, p. 313).

In the following subchapters, the work well-being of young adults during the pandemic phase and the post-peak period are discussed. After that, the focus moves to the possible key trends of the post-pandemic period, as well as to the management of work well-being in the post-pandemic period. Finally, this chapter ends with a summary of the theoretical framework.

### **3.1 Work well-being during the pandemic phase**

In the spring of 2020, after WHO (2020) declared Covid-19 as a pandemic, many governments set restrictions on human movement including daily commutes, closing international borders and stopping flights, and putting a pause on humanitarian missions as well as on regular asylum procedures (Lupton & Willis, 2021, p. 27). Each country has been dealing with the pandemic in its own way (Lazarus et al., 2020). Most countries have needed to make changes in policies considering healthcare, economics, education, employment, personal liberties, etc. (Brüssow & Timmis, 2021, p. 4088).

Pandemics are unlike other disasters since the aim of the response to them is to stop the virus from spreading, and how to do that needs to be well planned (Usher et al., 2020, p. 1019). The Covid-19 pandemic has been identified with various ways to protect oneself and others from the infection, such as lockdowns, quarantines, holding safety distance to members of other households, wearing facemasks, washing hands, and using hand-sanitizer as well as social distancing, transition of work and studies to remote mode and getting vaccinated on one's own turn (WHO, 2022b; Salmela-Aro et al., 2022; Van Mulukom et al., 2021; Lazarus et al., 2020). When the restrictions made office workers work from home, the work schedules became more flexible, and traveling for work meetings turned into video calls (Brüssow & Timmis, 2021, p. 4086; Chandrasekaran, 2021, p. 85). Since the restrictions changed everyday life, the collective sense of well-being and sense of security has been disturbed (Merikanto et al., 2022, p. 2).

Overall, when the pandemic began, the fear of the virus was spreading faster than the virus itself (Adhanom Ghebreyesus, 2020). When a pandemic occurs, the needed measures need to be implemented urgently and this fast change can cause additional anxiety among the stress regarding the virus itself (Usher et al., 2020, p. 1030). In countries where governments have implemented strict policies rapidly, the prevalence of depressive symptoms is essentially lower (Lee et al., 2021, p. 373). The pandemic has been controlled with the help of media by sharing a lot of information, from abundant different sources (Usher et al., 2020, p. 1019). However, since the start of the pandemic,

social media has been filled with misinformation and unauthenticated information, and these have caused anxiety and stress among readers (Kumar & Nayar, 2020, p. 1).

Relating to people, many have experienced the COVID-19 pandemic difficult for them, the times of isolation at home and being afraid of the impact that the pandemic might have on their lives have been stressful for many (Van Mulukom et al., 2021). The pandemic phase has been challenging resource investment; protecting against resource loss, recovering from previous losses, and gaining new resources, for young adults (Halbesleben et al., 2014, p. 1336). The balance between work and personal resources is important for the workability of employees, thereby when Covid-19 challenged the boundaries between work and personal life, the workability of young adults might have weakened (Ilmarinen, 2009, p. 3; van Schaaik et al., 2020). People have felt more anxious and depressed when they think about the severe effects the pandemic could have on their lives (Van Mulukom et al., 2021). Moreover, the feelings of social isolation are even stronger after being in quarantine. Loss of resources such as separation from close ones, boredom, loss of freedom, and uncertainty can worsen the status of mental well-being (Javed et al., 2020, p. 994). However, positive coping behaviors such as communicating frequently with close ones or reframing their situation positively, can be linked to the conservation of resources -theory as ways to protect the resources one has (Javed et al., 2020, p. 994; Halbesleben et al., 2014, p. 1335). These positive coping mechanisms made people feel more in control of their lives, as well as when the government dealt well with the crisis (Javed et al., 2020, p. 994). The biggest problem regarding the rise of mental health issues has been the lack of mental health professionals from whom people could receive needed help (Kumar & Nayar, 2020, p. 2).

Moreover, the retention of performance levels during the Pandemic Phase has been concerning organizations (Rochhi & Bernacchio, 2022, p. 689). They have addressed their worries on how employees are managing the adaptation to work-from-home, as the number of distractions increases when working from home instead of in office spaces. Aside from worrying about the productivity of employees who are working from home,

employers have an opposite concern about work well-being, as employees can also be working too much. Employees who have a tendency towards perfectionism are demanding more from themselves and thereby experiencing their work more demanding, their motivational process and conservation of resources are also challenged by the pandemic-related environmental changes (Zeijen et al., 2021; Halbesleben et al., 2014, p. 1335; Bakker & Demerouti, 2007, p. 313). Moreover, young highly educated employees at the beginning of their career can be prone to experience high levels of workaholism (Innanen et al., 2014). For some people, working from home may have brought new demands and thereby issues, in terms of technology, which requires compassion from colleagues (Rochhi & Bernacchio, 2022, p. 689).

During the most intense times of the pandemic, people who have gone through onboarding have joined organizations in a very different atmosphere than those who went through onboarding pre-pandemic (Chandrasekaran, 2021, pp. 86-87). Taking care of people who are in the early stages of their careers could be done by focusing more on the current needs for onboarding, giving them more support, and helping them grow networks (Microsoft, 2021, p. 32). Moreover, it is important that employees feel that they are responsible for their own work right from the beginning, no matter the outcome, in order to identify with their work (Gabriel & Aguinis, 2022, pp. 186-188).

### **3.2 Work well-being during the post-peak period**

The definition of the post-peak period states that in this phase, the pandemic activity appears to be diminishing and the disease levels drop below observed peak levels, nevertheless, additional waves can possibly happen (WHO, 2009). In order to be able to try and control the pandemic, it is important for governments to consider how satisfied citizens are with the actions set by governments so that possible challenges can be avoided while trying to achieve the goals related to controlling the pandemic (Lazarus et al., 2020). The pandemic started a domino effect where hospitals are overloaded, care for non-Covid-19 conditions has been delayed, health workers are becoming burned out,

businesses shutdowns and unemployment, problems with the supply chains, interruptions to education, increasing stress levels, mental health issues, and long-covid are causing new problems to deal with (Rahmandad & Sterman, 2022, p. 329).

According to a study conducted by Microsoft (2021, p. 2), “The year 2020 changed work forever, impacting every person and organization across the globe”. While working from home has created more family time and new job opportunities, work teams have suffered the consequences of online working and digital exhaustion. The pandemic introduced new ways of working; working from home created home offices and more flexible work schedules and traveling abroad or even domestically for meetings changed into video conferencing (Brüssow & Timmis, 2021, p. 4086; Chandrasekaran, 2021, p. 85). These changes brought economic benefits for organizations and logistical advantages for employees since they do not need to spend their time commuting to work. Working from home challenges the boundaries between work and personal life, simultaneously the amount of people struggling with well-being grows (Lederman, 2022).

During the post-peak period young adults have been experiencing exhaustion, issues with their mental well-being, and struggles with the long covid -disease. The anxiety and stress related to the pandemic have been increasing the number of issues with mental well-being, and it has been stated that the Covid-19 pandemic created another epidemic of mental health issues (Yao et al., 2020). In this part, the focus is shifted to these well-being experiences of young adults during the post-peak period of the pandemic.

### **3.2.1 Exhaustion in the post-peak period**

The changes that the pandemic introduced into the daily life of people, have been testing the limits of their resilience, having to cope with the demands of daily life can become exhausting, if there are not enough supporting resources to buffer the demands (Parmar, 2021; Bakker & Demerouti, 2007, pp. 314-320). For people who have a tendency to become workaholics, the longer workdays and growing workload can cause a real risk to

their well-being (Rocchi & Bernacchio, 2022, p. 689). This is especially possible among young highly educated employees who are at the beginning of their careers since they are already at risk of becoming workaholics (Innanen et al., 2014).

Digital transformation and remote working have made work accessible anywhere at any time, which has made it difficult for people to take time off or set boundaries between working life and private life (Threlkeld, 2021). Working remotely increased the digital intensity of workdays and the expectations towards employees (Microsoft, 2021, p. 8). In addition, a survey conducted by Indeed (an American worldwide employment website for job listings) revealed that 53 percent of the employees who are working from home or virtually are now working more hours than they were doing in the office (Threlkeld, 2021). Moreover, 31 percent of respondents said that they are working “much more” compared to the pre-pandemic time. From the Microsoft (2021, p. 2) survey respondents, 37% consider that their companies “are asking too much of them” during the pandemic. These results should be taken seriously, in order to take care of the work well-being and resources of employees. Furthermore, Dr. Maria Neira (WHO, 2021) has stated that “working 55 hours or more per week is a serious health hazard”.

High productivity levels are hiding exhausted workforces behind the numbers (Microsoft, 2021, pp. 6-8). Research has shown that those who have been struggling the most during covid, are frontline workers, women, generation Z, and people who are new to their careers. The work demands have increased to new dimensions due to the pandemic and it is showing in the motivation process of employees as well as in their health impairment process. From the respondents of the Microsoft study, 54% feel overburdened, 39% feel drained and around one in five believes that their employer doesn't care about their work-life balance.

### **3.2.2 The state of mental well-being in the post-peak period**

Already before the pandemic, the emotional well-being of employees and behavioral health were priority challenges (Bruce & English, 2020, p. 199). The Covid-19 pandemic has created “a parallel epidemic of fear, anxiety, and depression” (Yao et al., 2020). The focus of governmental efforts in tackling the Covid-19 pandemic has been on learning about the virus, how to prevent its spreading, and taking care of those who have been infected with it (Usher et al., 2020, p. 1019). However, societies have been lacking resources for handling pandemic-related mental health matters. Uncertainty and isolation are possible triggers of mental health issues, including stress, depression, and anxiety (Shah et al., 2020, p. 101). The pandemic has influenced people with mental health conditions and some of them have experienced relapses or worsening of their mental health condition (Yao et al., 2020). For example, prior problems such as social comparison, social withdrawal, and social handicapping might arise on the surface when living conditions are under change. Due to a large number of mental health issues, a mental health crisis can be called a “second pandemic” (Choi et al., 2020, p. 340).

The protective actions used to control the infectiveness might have had an impact on people; time spent in lockdown might have created a fear of social contact, physical distancing from others may have changed the general attitude towards others and many people could be dealing with pandemic-induced trauma (Brüssow & Timmis, 2021, p. 4087; Violant-Holz et al., 2020). As mentioned before, the instances that take place during young adulthood can have a long-term impact on the lives of young adults (Council et al., 2014, p. 124). Nevertheless, people have lost their loved ones for the Covid-19 and they have needed to deal with the grief and loss during abnormal times, and they continue living with the grief even after the situation of the pandemic calms down (Brüssow & Timmis, 2021, p. 4087). These mentioned issues may create stress, anxiety, and worsen current mental health issues or create new ones, and thereby challenge the well-being of young adults.

Even though the protective measures have been a way of keeping people safe from the virus, some of these measures have created a decline in social connectedness between people (Van Mulukom et al., 2021, p. 1327). Social connectedness is crucial for psychological well-being, therefore the physical distance that protection from the virus has required to establish between people keeps causing mental difficulties even after the pandemic eases. This can be linked to the idea that resource loss can cause problems with stress resistance and job satisfaction, motivation, and job performance (Halsbesleben et al., 2014, p. 1336; Hobfoll, 2002, p. 312).

Moreover, the isolation people have been going through in their personal lives due to the Covid-19 pandemic is also taking place at work (Microsoft, 2021, p. 13). For example, the little discussions and facial expressions that used to surround meetings, have vanished from online meetings (Rocchi & Bernacchio, 2022, pp. 692-693). Going through a crisis, the importance of a healthy level of communication between employers and employees has risen (Sulaiman et al., 2020, p. 88). During the pandemic, experienced loneliness increased due to working from home (Rocchi & Bernacchio, 2022, pp. 692-693). Networks at work that were close pre-pandemic have grown closer, while interactions with the distant network shrank (Microsoft, 2021, p. 13). Even though the close networks are closer than before, they have shown signs of weakening. Strong networks at work are important resources to upkeep employees' work well-being, as well as increase productivity and innovation among employees (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007, p. 313).

### **3.2.3 Long Covid**

Even the infection of Covid-19 can challenge the resources of an employee, depending on the severity of the infection and their current life situation. However, the negative impact on resources can increase, if they are facing the long covid. Regarding the physical well-being of young adults, it is possible that after the acute infection of Covid-19, people can feel better for days or weeks before the same or new symptoms begin (Rubin, 2020). Despite, whether a person has had a mild or severe Covid-19 -infection, they can suffer

from long covid, meaning that they have symptoms long after the acute infection (Crook et al., 2021, p. 1; Sow & Timmis, 2021, p. 4077). The list of possible symptoms of long covid includes fatigue, sleep disturbances, muscle pain, headache, etc. (Crook et al., 2021; Rubin, 2020). According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2022), the symptoms of long covid can last weeks, months, or longer, and they can go away and return.

Anthony Fauci, the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID) at the U.S. National Institutes of Health and currently the Chief Medical Advisor to President Joe Biden, has said how the syndrome of long covid can put individuals out of action for several weeks recovering from the virus (National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, 2022; Rubin, 2020). According to research, for over a third of the respondents, their health had not returned to the pre-infection state in two-to-three weeks after the positive covid-test (Tenforde et al., 2020, p. 996). One in five, of 18 to 34-year-old adults reported that their normal health status had not returned in 14-21 days after the test. For comparison, over 90% of people who have an influenza infection recover in two weeks after their test result. This kind of sickness can be stressful and exhausting, and having issues with physical health is challenging the conservation of resources (Hobfoll, 2002, p. 312).

### **3.3 Key trends of the post-pandemic period**

After covering how the pandemic might have affected the resources of young adults and thereby have an impact on their work well-being, it is time to move further to the trends of the post-pandemic era. In short, the challenge for organizations in the post-pandemic period or so called new normal is to find ways to adapt to the changed needs of the work environment and employees.

When discussing the post-pandemic period, the idea is that life would widely return to pre-pandemic conditions, “with tolerable, low rates of infection, hospitalization, and

death” (Rahmandad & Sterman, 2022, p. 330). Long-term consequences of Covid-19 affect economies, industries, global markets, agriculture, human health, health care, etc. (Kumar & Nayar, 2020, p. 1). There is uncertainty in the future labor market prospect, which is caused by the pandemic-driven recession and the geopolitical contest between countries (Vyas, 2022, p. 159). These matters need to be taken into consideration when re-evaluating the work well-being of young adults in the post-pandemic period.

The new normal consists of an ongoing burden of disease and changes to some of the pre-pandemic routines; countries and communities will enter a new phase when they are ready to accept the costs and harms as well as the disease still going on and causing deaths (Rahmandad & Sterman, 2022, p. 330). The pandemic has been globally extent and there have been many emerging variants arising from different sides of the world and possibly new ones will continue to emerge, the loss of immunity from prior infection and vaccination happens gradually and some people are vaccine-hesitant, all these things combined it is highly unlikely that eradication of Covid-19 would success (Rahmandad & Sterman, 2022, p. 329).

Already in 2020, Boland et al. have suggested four elements of work and workplace that companies could rethink when considering the post-pandemic era. Thereafter, in 2022, Vyas (p. 158) listed seven key trends in the working world, that were suggested to occur in the future. The first proposition of Vyas (2022, p. 158) was that accelerating digital transformation will be critical at workplaces, whereas Boland et al.(2020) suggest reforming processes of work. Then, in the post-pandemic era, hybrid work would become the new normal at workplaces, and tasks that can be done either remotely or only on-site need to be determined (Vyas, 2022, p. 158; Boland et al., 2020). Thirdly, Vyas (2022, p. 158) suggested how the office spaces will go through development and how all of the mentioned changes will impact organizational infrastructure and the mobility of labor. Similarly, Boland et al. (2020) have recommended the re-design of workspaces to be suitable for working remotely and on-site, as well as consideration regarding if relocating office spaces would be beneficial. The fifth proposition of Vyas (2022, p. 158), was that

challenges might arise regarding performance management, and sixth, the possible worsening of the existing inequalities. Lastly, the seventh key trend suggestion is that in the future there will be an increased focus on the work-life balance.

In the following subchapters key trends, such as digital transformation, and hybrid- and remote working models are presented. After that, when discussing the management of young adults' work well-being in the post-pandemic period, workplace culture, work-life balance, and performance management are presented in more detail.

### **3.3.1 Digital transformation**

Technological adaptation has been the most detectable change in the labor market during the pandemic; more changes to the labor market are unavoidable in order to maintain businesses running in the post-pandemic era (Vyas, 2022, p. 159). The sudden and compelling need for technology has both caused new demands but also provided resources. Now that businesses are – already or soon – finding themselves adapting to the new normal, Chandrasekaran (2021, p. 85) recommends that they should consider ways in which they could embrace digital transformation. One way to support the work well-being of young adults is to concentrate on finding ways to resist the prevalent digital exhaustion which can be crucial for the future work environment (Microsoft, 2021, p. 28). Therefore, moving away from prior processes that are inefficient and prevent productiveness, towards digital transformation is one way to aim for improvement (Chandrasekaran, 2021, p. 85).

When employees are working from home, their technology-related problems might take longer to solve, when they are facing the problems alone rather than with colleagues or technical support at the office (Vyas, 2022, p. 161). It is important to answer the rising demands by providing social virtual support for teleworkers, otherwise, them trying to solve their technical problems by themselves could take up the resources that are needed for the work itself (Mullins et al., 2022, p. 276). The potential risk of working

remotely for the resources of, not only young but all, employees, is a lack of informal and human interaction; digital miscommunication (Vyas, 2022, p. 161). It could challenge the interaction between co-workers and shape the team dynamics more individually than team-based.

For onboarding processes, technological adaptation could be a challenge or a possible resource to be able to improve the process and make it accessible to all. During the pandemic, new recruitments have gone through onboarding virtually, and it is possible for hybrid workplaces to utilize technology, for example, virtual reality, to have introductions via video conference, a virtual office tour, and setting up one-on-one conversations to help the newcomers to settle in (Chandrasekaran, 2021, pp. 86-87). However, there are risks if the virtual onboarding process is not created and implemented properly. Putting more effort and thought into the implementation of the virtual onboarding process can be crucial for the accumulation of work well-being of young adults, in the long run.

Relatively important is that organizations offer workspaces that answer to the needs of employees and are physically comfortable environments to work in (O'Donnell et al., 2019, pp. 1555-1556). Currently, remodeling office spaces to respond to the changing needs caused by hybrid working and digital transformation could be useful. Also, providing technology that enables teams to work efficiently together from different locations can improve the enjoyability of work.

### **3.3.2 Hybrid- and remote working models**

The pandemic has been an unexpected catalyst for change, especially in terms of work, including remote work, location, and practices of a workplace (Vyas, 2022, p. 157; Chandrasekaran, 2021, p. 85). Organizations are in a situation where they are expected to reassess their work in a holistic way and the role of office spaces for their employees as a safe and productive environment (Boland et al., 2020). Public attitudes towards working remotely have changed for the better and employees working from their workspace of

choice can possibly see better results for their overall well-being (Vyas, 2022, p. 157). However, in order to create hybrid- and remote working models in which employees are thriving, it is important to acknowledge the challenges of these work models to be able to overcome them.

Likely, depending on the nature of the work, hybrid working and staying flexible could be the new normal after the pandemic eases (Vyas, 2022, pp. 159-162). If so, then companies' strategies should be created based on their own needs for hybrid work or long-time remote work. Both employers and employees have their own expectations for remote working conditions (Adekova et al., 2022, p. 1410). Cooperation from different relevant parties, such as policymakers and businesses, is required to create a sustainable model for the "new normal" work practices (Vyas, 2022, pp. 159-163). Some of the facilitators of remote working in the new normal are flexible working preferences, leadership roles and expectations, smart working practices, and self-discipline (Adekova et al., 2022, p. 1410). Thereby, hybrid- or remote working can make new resources accessible to employees. According to Vyas (2022, p. 164) the way in which governments address the new normal of hybrid and remote working will have an impact on the work-life balance and also, on workplace inequalities and abuse. Policies regarding employee protection and well-being are essential.

Moving towards the hybrid work model, jobs are no longer based on a location, and thereby talents can be recruited from a larger area (Vyas, 2022, p. 160). Companies can reconsider moving to smaller office spaces, relocating office spaces from high-cost cities to more affordable ones, renting co-working spaces, or creating a virtual office environment. According to the Microsoft (2021, p. 4) survey, 73% of the respondents want to keep their flexible remote work opportunities open and simultaneously 67% wish to have more time in person together with their teams.

### **3.4 Management of young adults' work wellbeing in the post-pandemic world**

In the pandemic phase and post-peak period, organizations started to adapt themselves to the new situation and adjust their policies (Chandrasekaran, 2021, p. 85). As mentioned before, the pandemic brought economic problems for enterprises and regardless of the size of the company many firms have had to shut down and lay off their employees (Brüssow & Timmis, 2021, pp. 4085-4086). Due to the impact of the pandemic on resources, the productivity of the workforce and workplaces has decreased, which impacts all sectors of the economy. While some unemployed can find new employment quickly, there are people who struggle to find a new workplace for them, and some of them might become permanently unemployed (Brüssow & Timmis, 2021, pp. 4085-4086). The economic and mental health consequences caused by this need to be considered.

When organizations recognize their human capital as a competitive advantage, it has been suggested (Wahda et al., 2021, p. 1) that they focus on creating a working environment that keeps employees satisfied, take their individual needs into account, and thereby enables them to perform on their best level. It is recommended for employers to acknowledge how the pandemic has consumed workers' resources and help their employees to acquire new ones by focusing on their well-being (Azzouzi & Makkaoui, 2022, p. 190; Halbesleben et al., 2014, p. 1335) By prioritizing finding ways to improve in managing their staff, organizations will, in turn, receive creative ideas, loyalty, and profit (Azzouzi & Makkaoui, 2022, p. 192).

Furthermore, senior managers become interested in taking care of the well-being of their employees when the lost productivity and absence costs attract their attention (Hesketh & Cooper, 2014). Most visible sign of issues in mental and physical well-being are unplanned employee absences, these can point out issues in motivation and engagement (Prosser, 2018, p. 18). In the United Kingdom, the yearly costs of employees' ill health exceed £100 billion, and in the United States of America, it is estimated that health-related productivity losses are around \$260 billion, yearly. According to WHO

(2022), mental health problems, such as depression and anxiety disorders, can cost the global economy \$1 trillion annually in lost productivity. In Finland, in 2020, 34 percent of the days on sickness allowance were because of mental health disorders (The Social Insurance Institution of Finland, 2019) which means that mental health is the largest factor behind sickness allowance reciprocity.

Due to the organizational costs caused by issues with work well-being and the role of situational factors in the development of job strain, it would be important for corporations to have organizational and social strategies on how to prevent young employees from becoming exhausted as well as how to help young employees who struggle with their work wellbeing (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). In order to avoid the issues with work well-being, resource, and productivity losses as well as absence costs, companies might benefit from shifting their focus on updating their organizational and social strategies along with their implementation. People who are suffering with their work well-being need help in making structural changes to their working conditions and health status (Bakker & Costa, 2014). Therefore, Microsoft (2021, p. 32) recommends that organizations should review their wellness programs, to keep them up-to-date with their employees' changing needs that have been impacted by the pandemic.

Organizations that aim to change their work environment with protective and preventive manners are investing in the future (Quick & Henderson, 2016). In order to tackle the issues with work well-being, all management levels need to be working on the matter, creating the right atmosphere for the work environment and acquiring the relevant knowledge and skills to improve the situation (Prosser, 2018, p. 19). Studies have shown that companies should take seriously the health concerns arising from working overtime and protect their employees from working too many hours, as it is acknowledged how work-related stressors, for example, working overtime have negative impacts on young adults' mental well-being (WHO, 2021; Law et al., 2020, p. 619). Following practices could be helpful in the process; governments could introduce laws, regulations, and policies that would ban mandatory overtime and guarantee maximum limits on working

time (WHO, 2021). Also, agreements between employers and workers' associations could be set on making working time more flexible and agreeing on the maximum number of working hours. In order to make sure that the working hours do not go over 55 hours per week, employees could share their data regarding working hours.

### **3.4.1 Workplace culture**

Alimo-Metcalfe (2018, p. 14) recommends that organizations should acknowledge aspects and resources that impact their employees' engagement, performance, and well-being when times are uncertain. By understanding these, they can create work environments that are supportive of their employees during different times. When considering how to improve the work well-being of employees and what kind of changes to make in order to enable them to perform at their best level, companies could rethink their resources, culture, and procedures (Microsoft, 2021, p. 28; Wahda et al., 2021, p. 1).

Currently, the amount of employees reconsidering their careers poses a challenge to organizations to shape their work environments according to their employees' updated needs (Microsoft, 2021, p. 22). Therefore, companies cannot overlook the importance of social capital and its link to the motivational process and thereby the connection with innovation, creativity, and productivity (Microsoft, 2021, pp. 30-31). Ways to affect workplace well-being positively are focusing on communication, leadership, and learning and development (International Labour Organization, 1996-2022). HR teams are responsible for getting the needed recognition and investments for the well-being programs of employees (Walker, 2021, p. 152).

A growing demand for healthy workplace cultures exists in the post-pandemic times (Vyas, 2022, p. 162). In order to retain and attract the best talent, it is crucial to rethink the employee experience and establish a collaborative workplace culture where people support each other, are kind, and can have fun with each other at work. As a result of remote and hybrid environments, future work environments enable new career

opportunities since people are not tied to work from a certain place (Microsoft, 2021, p. 18). This change is positive for both workers and employers since organizations can reach more applicants for their open positions and get to choose the best candidate for them. Chief Economist of LinkedIn, Karin Kimbrough claims that this change democratizes access to opportunity (Microsoft, 2021, p. 19).

Managers have the opportunity to boost the authenticity of the interactions at work, thus strengthening future inclusiveness, productivity, and innovativeness (Microsoft, 2021, p. 18). Adekova et al. (2022, p. 1420) recommend how workplace cultures should encourage employees to take breaks since they have a positive impact on productivity. However, respecting the permission to have breaks and having the self-discipline to not abuse the given privilege, is also recommended for employees. Encouraging employees to take breaks regularly and work within normal hours will help them set a line between their work and out-of-work activities (Vyas, 2022, pp. 162-163).

When the majority of office workers were working remotely, socializing with co-workers reduced the risk of issues with work well-being, rather than withdrawing from the social networks from work (Queen & Harding, 2020). When the work relationships among employees are working well, they are likely to experience job engagement (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). While, on the other hand, if the relationships lack trust and support, and there are unresolved conflicts challenging the atmosphere, then employees are at a bigger risk of experiencing job strain. Because in that case, the work relationships that have been job resources are turning into job demands, if there are unresolved issues as a burden on them.

Moreover, according to Jared Spataro, Microsoft 365 Corporate Vice President, rethinking which topics require a meeting and which could be dealt with documents, allows people to structure their days more flexibly and releases more time for them to work intently (Microsoft, 2021, p. 28). Furthermore, the work culture is recommended to be supportive, enabling, and encouraging employees to take breaks. It is proven that

employees who feel productive are more likely to take breaks. Therefore, it can be agreed that there is a connection between workplace well-being and productivity

### **3.4.2 Work-life balance**

Currently, it is important that work-life balance policies are updated to match the changed needs of the labor market (Vyas, 2022, pp. 162-163). It might be challenging for young adults to balance work and personal life when adapting to the new normal, after all, the boundaries between those two have been stretched during the phases of the pandemic (Threlkeld, 2021). Simultaneously, employees are balancing their work and personal resources, when trying to maintain their work ability (Ilmarinen, 2009, p. 2). Vyas (2022, p. 162) has suggested that employers should plan how to support their employees' work-life balance since taking care of it is a way of keeping employees motivated and performing as hoped. Managing work-life balance might be more preferable in hybrid work conditions than in a completely remote working environment (Vyas, 2022, pp. 162-163).

Moreover, clarity over the work tasks and working hours helps employees to understand what is required from them. Vyas (2022, pp. 162-163) recommends that the policymakers create an action plan rather than a list of suggestions and include a section where it is mentioned when and which employees can work either on-site or remotely. It has been suggested (Vyas, 2022, pp. 162-163) that there should be policies regarding remote working hours, guaranteeing remote workers that they are trusted and supported, making sure that working from the office is possible, ensuring equal pay, and giving them the right to disconnect. Also, organizations can encourage better work-life balance by promoting more flexibility, fixing biased job descriptions, and actively seeking diverse talents (Microsoft, 2021, p. 31). In addition, considering how to help supervisors trust and support their employees better by rethinking ways of managing and appraising employees would be important for achieving work-life balance (Vyas, 2022, p. 163).

Focusing on improving the workplace culture, providing clarity over their work to employees, and offering different supporting programs related to well-being, are a few ways to focus on the work well-being of employees (Vyas, 2022, pp. 162-163). Meanwhile, some companies encourage their employees to take time and care for their mental space by, for example, offering mental health -app subscriptions that remind their employees to meditate or take a walk every once in a while (Rocchi & Bernacchio, 2022, p. 697). As well as some organizations tie sponsorships with charities and agree to double their employees' donations, to do their corporate social responsibility.

Another way to consider for organizations when wanting to support the work-life balance of employees is to provide support relating to the financial concerns of their employees and provide financial well-being programs (Jackson, 2022, p. 71). Having financial worries can have an impact on productivity, absenteeism, and retention, hence providing help through financial information to employees can have a great impact on their well-being. In addition, non-monetary rewards that organizations could give out to their employees could be for example; a more flexible work schedule, more vacation time, or adjusted hours (Gabriel & Aguinis, 2022, p. 189). Microsoft (2021, p. 32) suggests in their study how modern needs for actions regarding work well-being, could consist of flexible schedules, increased access to therapy, and “wellness days” that would be additional free days that would normalize taking a day off for mental health.

### **3.4.3 Performance management**

One of the key trends, that according to Vyas (2022, p. 158), could be taking place in the post-pandemic working world, is possible challenges regarding performance management. The challenges of the pandemic and remote work have been overwhelming for some companies and they might have reduced or abandoned their performance management (Aguinis & Burgi-Tian, 2021, p. 235; Hamouche, 2021). However, during crises keeping up and improving the process of performance management is even more

important. Therefore, this chapter concerns the importance of performance management in times of changes in the work environment.

Well-handled performance management is an important tool for supervisors to learn about the current state of their employees' work well-being and work-life balance (Aguinis & Burgi-Tian, 2021, p. 235). Together with the company policies, Schrage (2020) suggested that the key performance indicators (KPIs) should be kept up to date to ensure that working in the changing environment is fluent and guiding the company in the desired direction. Also, sharing strategy, data, and feedback with employees can keep them motivated to work for the success of the company (Hamouche, 2021). Therefore, communicating the strategy of the company and its goals can help employees align their activities and outputs accordingly and help them understand better the meaning of their work (Aguinis & Burgi-Tian, 2021, p. 235). Especially during remote and hybrid working, the importance of communicating clearly the objectives increases.

Moreover, Aguinis & Burgi-Tian (2021, p. 235) recommend how discussions of performance management should focus on both, past and future performances, creating personal development plans can be helpful for the process of aligning the effort and resources of the employee together with the organizational goals. After feeling the pandemic-related uncertainty, performance management can assure employees that their effort is valued (Dorniak-Wall, n.d.). Some concrete ways to develop and improve performance management after the pandemic could be for example, conducting "stay interviews" which are ways to learn from the well-performing employees themselves, how to keep them in the company, and gathering feedback for employees from multiple sources (Aguinis & Burgi-Tian, 2021, p. 237). In a multisource feedback system, also called a 360-degree system, the feedback is gathered from peers, partners, customers, and direct reports, thereby employees receive more accurate feedback and are more likely to get the support they need.

### 3.5 Theoretical framework of the study

The aim of this chapter is to summarize the theoretical framework of the research and bring together the main ideas of the previous chapters. After reading this section the reader is reminded of the bigger picture that consists of the work well-being of young adults during the pandemic and the management of their work well-being in the post-pandemic world. The theoretical framework is based on current theories, studies, and literature.

The theoretical framework is built on two theories; the Job Demands-Resources theory and the Conservation of Resources -model, which are important for understanding the concept of work well-being. These theories discuss the importance of resources and the consequences of their lack of, on the state of workplace well-being. Through resource investment, people can protect their existing resources and gain additional ones (Halbesleben et al., 2014, p. 1336). Resources play an important role in the work well-being of employees, they can be a buffer against the demands of the job and increase motivation, work engagement, and improve performance (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007, p. 313). However, unreasonable job demands, such as work overload, time pressure, and reduced job control, can cause resource loss and activate the health impairment process, which can lead to problems with well-being (de Beer et al., 2016, p. 388; Bakker & Demerouti, 2007, pp. 310-313).

Young adulthood is a crucial time in the lives of people, since events that take place between the ages of 18 and 25 years, have an influence on their long-term socioeconomic trajectories (Higley, 2019; Council et al., 2014, p. 124). In order to understand better the young adults at the beginning of their careers, learning how their earlier experiences might be impacting their current state of work well-being could be beneficial for employers. For example, implemented social strategies during university studies as well as practiced social comparison, can impact how employees experience exhaustion and job strain at the beginning of their careers (Salmela-Aro et al., 2011; Patrick et al., 2004). Young adults who have been prone to perfectionism before, might feel the urge to set

high standards for themselves under the job demands and they could experience workaholism (Curran & Hill, 2019, pp. 419-421; Inananen et al., 2014). Therefore, it is important to understand the current work-related stressors affecting the workability of young adults, in order to gain an overall picture of reasons that might be impacting their state of work well-being (Law et al., 2020, p. 619).

The Covid-19 pandemic has been a global event that has impacted people and companies all over the world and influenced the long-term socioeconomic trajectories of young adults (ILO, 2022, p. 3). Here, the discussion about the pandemic has been built on the defined pandemic phases by WHO (2009); the pandemic phase, the post-peak period, and the post-pandemic period. When the pandemic began, it had an impact on all aspects of life; governments and organizations needed to set restrictions and change their policies, while individuals needed to adapt to the fast-phased changes while struggling with stress and anxiety (Lupton & Willis, 2021, p. 27; Brüssow & Timmis, 2021, p. 4088; Usher et al., 2020, p. 1030). The pandemic has started resource loss cycles when employees have been dealing with uncertainty, and struggling with work-life balance and job demands. Therefore, learning how the pandemic has impacted the work well-being of young adults is crucial for understanding how their work well-being in the post-pandemic conditions should be managed and lost resources restored (Halbesleben et al., 2014, p. 1336).

Therefore, when companies are adapting their policies and work environment to the post-pandemic world, it has been suggested (Vyas, 2022, pp. 162-163) that they should aim to meet the changed needs for the working environment and habits. Whether it concerns digital transformation, changing the work environment permanently to the hybrid- or remote model, or rethinking the utilization of office spaces, it is important to prioritize answering to the needs of the employees. Organizations that acknowledge the importance of their human capital and their well-being, understand how the management of the work well-being of young adults is necessary for the success of the company. Paying attention to the workplace culture, supporting work-life balance, and creating

efficient performance management are ways for employers to understand better their employees and their state of work well-being.

In conclusion, the theoretical framework has shown how the resources of an employee are in an important role when it comes to their workplace well-being. The long-term impacts of Covid-19 on the lives of young adults cannot be underestimated and therefore companies need to acknowledge how to keep their management of work well-being up-to-date in the ever-changing work environments.

## **4 Methodology of the study**

In this chapter, the methodological choices of the thesis are introduced. The following methods are chosen considering the research question of the thesis. This chapter proceeds in the following order. First, the research philosophy, which forms the background for other methodological choices, is presented. Next, introducing the research design, and after that, the data collection and data analysis are discussed.

### **4.1 Research philosophy and approach**

According to Saunders et al. (2020, p. 130), research philosophy "refers to a system of beliefs and assumptions about the development of knowledge". This study is based on the ontological perspective, which "concerns the ideas about the existence of and relationship between people, society, and the world in general" (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). Moreover, when reality is seen as subjective, it is believed that perceptions and experiences are potentially different for each person and can change over time and context. The subjectivist view on ontology is called constructionism, and its' assumption is that "social actors produce social reality through social interaction". Experiences related to work well-being and the Covid-19 -pandemic are individual experiences that are different for each, because of their diverse personal characteristics. This empirical study aims to build an understanding of how has the work well-being of young adults evolved during the stages of Covid-19 and how can the challenges of work well-being be managed from the point of view of young adults.

Moreover, a philosophical position from a subjectivist perspective, called interpretivism is applied in this study (Saunders et al., 2020, p. 148). Both, interpretivism and constructionism are focused on understanding how people, both as individuals and in groups, define and understand social events and settings (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). According to Saunders et al. (2020, p. 148), "the purpose of interpretivist research is to create new, richer understandings and interpretations of social worlds and contexts".

Individuals experience their surroundings differently, and therefore listening and understanding their point-of-views one can understand the social world a little better (Wang & Park, 2016, p. 86). Interpretivism is a logical choice for this type of study, where the personal experiences of individuals are on focus.

Furthermore, an abductive approach is applied to this study. This approach is a combination of the two basic research directions; deduction, moving from theory to data, and induction, from data to theory, as the abductive approach moves back and forth between theory and data (Saunders et al., 2020, pp. 155-156). The abductive approach is often used by business and management researchers, which supports its' choice for this research also.

## **4.2 Research design**

In general, there exist two research designs; quantitative research generates numerical data, and qualitative, non-numerical data (Saunders et al., 2020, p. 175). In this research, a qualitative research approach is adopted. According to Wang & Park (2016, p. 86), "Qualitative research is a research strategy to collect data about a person, a group, or a community from their participants' own perspectives". This choice of qualitative research supports the earlier mentioned decisions regarding the adaption of interpretive philosophy and abductive approach to this study (Saunders et al., p. 179). After all, in qualitative research, researchers are supposed to decode the subjective and socially constructed meanings shared relating to the studied topic, and they often utilize the abductive approach in their work. The plan is to use a single data collection technique, also known as a mono-method qualitative study, for this study.

This study will be a descripto-explanatory study, a combination of descriptive and exploratory studies because the description will be utilized as a precursor to the explanation (Saunders et al., 2020, p. 188). At the beginning of data collection, the idea will be to gain a short description of the interviewees and then follow with exploratory questions.

The aim is to gather answers that clarify the understanding of the research topic and findings can be used to utilize to answer the research question.

Utilizing qualitative interviews is an efficient and practical way to study people's personal experiences (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, pp. 80-81). Research interviews are efficient ways to gather reliable and valid data that are important for the research question and objectives (Saunders et al., 2020, p. 434). Moreover, when an interpretive philosophy is applied in this study it is beneficial to utilize a method in which asking extra questions is possible in order to gain a rich set of data from the interview (Saunders et al., 2020, p. 434).

### **4.3 Research methods**

#### **4.3.1 Sampling**

In this study, the target population of the research is young adults who have graduated from an International Master's Degree program at the University of Vaasa, and have been working or started their careers during the times of Pandemic. The international work environment can consist of, for example, an international team, they are located abroad, or there is some other international characteristic to their work. Interviewees have graduated, and some of them have started working during their university studies. Their work experience is either from the same company during Covid-19, or some of them have started at a new company in the midst of the pandemic. Through the interviews is gathered information and experiences of the workplace well-being of young adults during the phases of the Covid-19 -pandemic and of the current needs of young adults for the work well-being management after the pandemic.

When Covid-19 was declared a pandemic in 2020, people born between the years 1995-2002 were in the phase of young adulthood and currently, they are 21-28 years-old

young adults (Higley, 2019). The target population is 24-31 so they match the requirements of graduation, have work experience during Covid-19, and are young adults.

The participants have been reached through an email list of alumni of the International Business Master's program of the University of Vaasa. The sample size consists of nine individuals because holding in-depth interviews requires more time than survey research (Wang & Park, 2016, p. 94).

Code	Age	Educational background	Work location	Lives alone / with someone	Kids
1A	30	Master of International Business	Tampere	with someone	no
2B	29	Master of International Business	Helsinki	with someone	no
3C	28	Master of Strategic Business Development	Helsinki	alone	no
4D	28	Master of International Business	Stockholm	with someone	no
5E	27	Master of International Business	Helsinki	with someone	no
6F	29	Master of International Business	Helsinki	with someone	no
7G	28	Master of International Business	Tampere	with someone	no
8H	28	Master of International Business	Helsinki	with someone	no
9I	31	Master of International Business	Barcelona	with someone	no

**Table 2.** Sample description table

#### 4.3.2 Data collection

The primary data for this study is collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews. When trying to gain an understanding of the needs for work-wellbeing of young adults, it is important to gather the data of their experiences, straight from them. It is an efficient way of getting detailed stories from individuals' own perspectives by holding in-depth interviews (Wang & Park, 2016, p. 91). In order to be able to understand the interviewees better, it is important that the interviewer can ask for an explanation or

clarification of some answers, therefore semi-structured interviews will be held for this study (Saunders et al., 2020, p. 434). Also, when holding semi-structured interviews, the interviewee has the possibility to change the order or wording of questions to each research if it is seen as a better choice (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, p. 82). In addition, in this type of interview, the tone is quite conversational and informal, which enables the raise of important topics from the participant as well. Interviews can be either unstructured, semi-structured, or structured (Wang & Park, 2016, p. 91). They can be conducted face-to-face or through video calls or emails.

For this study, there are certain key themes that are discussed in the semi-structured interviews, such as background information, work well-being in general and during the pandemic, as well as the management of work well-being. The interview questions can be found from the appendices.. The questions are starting with “what” or “how”, which is usual for semi-structured interviews (Saunders et al., 2020, p. 187; Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, p. 82). Through open questions, it is possible to gain more information from the interviewee when they can share their point of view freely.

#### **4.4 Data analysis**

According to Eriksson & Kovalainen (2016, p. 120), the aim of the data analysis is to create a realistic and coherent definition of the studied topic. Also, to understand from the data the meanings behind the answers of the interviewees and thereby be able to gather a precise and good analysis of the data.

Researchers utilize coding for the analysis of their research data, however, it is not necessary to use it when doing qualitative content analysis (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016, p. 120). The role of the researcher is to be a “subjective and self-reflective interpreter of the data” who relies on their intuition, mind mapping, memo writing, and close reading of the data. Interpretation is a method of analysis, in which the focus is on how things are said, done and what is the meaning behind them.

The interviews are recorded and then transcribed, in order to enable the understanding of the data and find similarities between different interviews. Similarities are coded to ease the process. The findings are divided into experienced evolvement of demands and resources during the pandemic and findings regarding management of work well-being as experienced by the interviewees.

#### **4.5 Trustworthiness of the study**

When evaluating research in social sciences, there are two classic evaluation criteria that are oftentimes utilized; reliability and validity (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016, p. 305). However, there are conflicting opinions related to whether reliability and validity are accurate ways to evaluate interview research. Because there are mentions of how using these classic evaluation criteria in qualitative research has been problematic, it is better to use the evaluation criteria that have been developed to better match the qualitative research. Eriksson & Kovalainen (2016, pp. 307-308) introduce in their book the other concept of 'trustworthiness' created by Lincoln and Guba in 1985, their concept consists of four aspects: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Firstly, the credibility of the research is considered by having nine different interviewees and providing background information about the interviewees. No more interviews are being held when noticed that no additional insights are received from the answers of the participants. Then, the transferability of the research is about whether the same findings could be applicable to other situations or populations (Nowell et.al., 2017, p. 3). Readers can assess the transferability by the characteristics of the interviewees and by the quotes from their answers in the Findings chapter. Following with dependability that considers the transparent data collection and analysis methods utilized in the study, and whether someone else could replicate the research and get the same responses (Nowell et.al., 2017, p. 3). Lastly, the confirmability of the study is about transparency, and recognizing the possible biases of the researcher in order to make sure that those are not affecting the research.

## 5 Findings

The findings of the study are presented in this chapter. The aim of the study is to build a better understanding regarding the management of young adults' work well-being in the post-pandemic world. From interviews with young adults, information was gathered on how their job demands and resources evolved throughout the pandemic. Alongside the pandemic-related changes, their needs for management of work well-being have also changed. According to the research question and objectives, the findings are divided into the following sections: the evolvement of work well-being among young adults during stages of Covid-19, and management of the work well-being-related challenges from the point of view of young adults.

### 5.1 The evolvement of work well-being among young adults during Covid-19

In this section, the findings regarding the evolvement of young adults' work well-being during the Covid-19 pandemic are presented. For the sake of clarity, the chapter is divided into two parts, firstly introducing the evolvement of job demands, and then job resources, as experienced by the interviewees over the times of the pandemic. Since all the interviewees were young adults, the findings present their perspectives on how they experienced Covid-19.

Even though the pandemic influenced the lives of countless people globally, the focus of this thesis is on the experiences of young adults, as changes taking place in young adulthood can have life-long impacts on their lives.

*I guess even if the pandemic didn't happen, I think there would be a lot of things to consider and think at this point (young adulthood). And when the pandemic hits on top of all, I think it made it really tough to handle the situation overall. [8H]*

For young adults, the pandemic was not just a fear of disease and uncertainty, but they were also grieving the missed opportunities and events, and struggling with the feeling of lost time.

*And also the continuous fear of getting some disease that could affect your closed ones. [7G]*

*[...] but it was mostly very frustrating and it felt like I was missing out my youth. [3C]*

### **5.1.1 The evolvement of demands over the pandemic as experienced by the interviewees**

In this chapter, the findings regarding interviewees' experiences over the evolvement of demands over the times of pandemic, are presented. As previously stated, job demands are physical, social, or organizational prospects of a job, these can be for example, work overload, time pressure, and reduced job control (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007, p. 310; Demerouti et al., 2001).

As found out in the research, young adults set higher standards for themselves than before and those employees who set higher standards for their performance are also likely to perceive their work as really demanding (Zeijen et al., 2021; Curran & Hill, 2019, pp. 419-421). One interviewee shared that they could not live up to their own expectations that were set before the pandemic. For some of the interviewees, their self-demands increased more during the pandemic and the main cause for that was when working from home everyone became their own evaluator on whether they were doing enough.

*I am not 100% sure if the demands of the job actually increased after the pandemic started, or if it just felt that way, but that's at least the outcome that I felt that now there is much more that I need to do and accomplish. [1A]*

Even before the pandemic young adults have considered setting boundaries, between work- and personal life, challenging. They are in a phase of their career of their career when they might feel the urge to prove their capabilities and accomplish a lot.

*Maybe young adults are more in the position that they really want to try and they put career first, and everything else second kind of mentality. [...] When you are young adult and have just graduated, it is actually quite hard to find the moment when enough is enough, because there is always more to do when there is always something more you can achieve. [1A]*

Young adults themselves, agree on how their well-being differs from their older colleagues. The reason for this might be the amount and length of prior work experience. Older, or more experienced colleagues might have a better understanding of their boundaries and they are willing to stand up for those. According to the interviewees, they are more skilled in separating their personal and working lives.

*I would say the more senior employees have a lot more sense of their boundaries, and they sort of know better what is expected of them and have more resources to say no. [5E]*

When the pandemic started, people had to stay at home for their work and free time, resulting in the boundaries between those two slowly disappearing. People were working long days and getting into the habit of answering messages even in the evenings.

*[...] finding the balance and the right time to just close your laptop and finish your working day. It's a skill and I hope we all learn to use it. [5E]*

Earlier different things, such as the journey to the office and back home, and lunch break with colleagues, used to bring a rhythm to the day, but when working from home there is not much movement or change of environments. When the periods of working remotely were long, and there were no opportunities to work onsite, the days started to feel repetitive and lonely for some people.

*I guess during the pandemic and post peak, the thing that has been hard is how repetitive the days are like I feel like I'm living the same day all over again. [8H]*

It was not only the ones who had gone through onboarding during the pandemic who felt that creating and keeping up connections with colleagues had become more difficult.

Employees were lacking more casual work encounters and only seeing each other in video meetings. As stated in the study, according to Microsoft (2021, p. 13) close pre-pandemic networks have grown closer and interactions with others have diminished, this became confirmed by one interviewee's experiences as well:

*I felt that a lot of people became very passive in their own working, they stopped networking with new people. [...] Because of course they kept in contact with the people they have already established connections with, but it was much more harder to establish new connections remotely. [3C]*

Not only the amount of communication decreased but also the quality of it. According to one interviewee, colleagues became more work-oriented over the pandemic which influenced their ways of communicating their requests for others.

*I noticed that people's communication became quite direct and sometimes even a little bit rude because they were so focused on getting from you what they wanted as job-related, but not remembering that you are also a person and you have many other things to do as well. [6F]*

Communication was not the only thing that changed between people, as the pandemic-related safety instructions and how people were following those, influenced how people perceived others. One of the interviewees shared their experience:

*I realized how easy it is to follow orders, and how I feel about people who don't. [...] Of course, these are personal choices, and they shouldn't lead to prejudice or discrimination, but they can lead to, and I was having those thoughts in my head like 'I don't want to meet this person because I don't know if he took the vaccine' or 'I know he doesn't wear the mask when he uses public transport so I don't want to meet with him'. [9I]*

Over the pandemic, the importance of supervisor work increased as people were not as easy to reach out to as they had been when everyone came to the office daily. During the pandemic, supervisor work needed more effort and time. However, if the time for supervisory work was not allocated by the organization, then the teams could be struggling despite the additional pressure of the pandemic crisis.

*In our company, the supervisors do not have lot of time to invest to their workers I think, and the reason might be that they are quite booked. Because they are also doing customer work and then they have maybe lack of hours to use to the supervisor work, but it depends on the company and I think maybe in our company there's not that much invested to how our supervisors are doing their work. [...] So the problem is not that they don't want to help, it's maybe that they don't have enough time to help.[7G]*

While the pandemic caused stress and fear regarding the health of oneself and others, it also brought up anxiety over the economic situation of companies and individuals. A lot of people all over the world experienced several different impacts of the pandemic. Moreover, the pandemic caused another serious epidemic of mental health issues to be dealt with now and in the future. The disease also appeared to some people with long-term symptoms that might continue for several months and challenged their everyday lives. One of the interviewees shared their experience of having long covid, and how it impacted their life:

*That was really hard, because I really suffered at work. I couldn't stay up for eight hours and I had really bad, long, symptoms. And that's where my workplace really supported me. They were able to give me a lot of tests. We found out that I got asthma from Covid, for example. Which I wouldn't probably have found out if I didn't have the support from my workplace, because they really provided me and they were able to give me the flexibility that I needed. So when I wasn't able to work, I was able to take time off and take pauses during the day, working remotely. So that was really helpful. [2B]*

Some people continue to struggle with physical or mental health issues as well as with the economic effects of the pandemic, even when countries globally have moved into the post-pandemic period. The pandemic was a groundbreaking global experience, that will have long-term effects on societies, different environments, and individuals. Going through such a global experience has had an impact on the perspective through which people look at things now in post-pandemic times.

*I think life feels a bit boring, so that's the challenge. I don't know if it is related to Covid or if it would be even without Covid the same situation, but I think life sort of feels, maybe it's a millennial thing, but life feels kind of bit like boring. [8H]*

A return to the office may create new organizational procedures because not everyone is working from the same location.

*Maybe having the balance of how I'm visiting on-site at the office, because it's not always easy in our work, as people have quite flexible work, it's not always easy to arrange office days and etc. [7G]*

Now when teams can be in multiple different locations daily, it is important that the digital transformation can support employees' changing needs for the work environment. In some companies, hybrid meetings are not problem-free, either the technology is too complex, or the employees are not taught to utilize it properly.

*We do have a couple of spaces which would have this option (hosting a hybrid-meeting), but the technology is too complicated, and doesn't work, so people just use their laptops. [6F]*

### **5.1.2 The evolvement of resources over the pandemic as experienced by the interviewees**

In this chapter, the findings regarding the evolvement of resources that young adults have experienced over the different phases of the pandemic are introduced. Resources help employees do their work, stay motivated, and protect them from the demands of the work.

Interviewees sense that before the pandemic their work well-being was good, similar to the post-pandemic period or there were no issues related to it. If there were any issues, those arose from combining work and studies or from the work environment. What interviewees considered important for their work well-being before the pandemic, was the support from coworkers and the community, as well as the social aspects of work including after-work events.

*I value the working community and the social aspects of work. Of course, the fact that the work is interesting is very important to me. It's very hard for me to focus on stuff that I'm not interested in. [...] But I think the community is what I valued a lot in the working life and the fact that you can talk to peers and make friends with your coworkers. [3C]*

*For me, it's the being at the workplace basically and doing all those after-work stuff as well, dinners, drinks, and all kinds of events. [4D]*

Overall, the interviewees did consider that setting boundaries between work and personal life was easier before the pandemic since work only happened in office spaces.

*Before the pandemic, I guess it was a lot easier to shut off work when you left the office. [8H]*

When the pandemic started, the not-first-line workers would work from their homes, whether they were living alone, with someone, or with their families. This had an impact on the amount that they would spend in human contact, as the social life from work moved into the online form. At this point, it occurred to some employees that they prefer their working community over the actual work.

*I think, during the pandemic, the meaningfulness of the work task got more important than before the pandemic because before pandemic you would be doing anything because it was just with the nice employees and nice colleagues. [2B]*

Some young adults have experienced an exceptional situation, they started their careers during the pandemic or post-peak period, and were onboarded virtually. Taking care of and transferring the onboarding process into an online form might have been problematic and stressful for organizations, as successful onboarding would be an important starting point for the employee experience. Few of the interviewees had gone through online onboarding during the pandemic phase, and they shared their experiences:

*Maybe it wasn't much worse from the company point of view, because they gave me all the info that I needed. But then you didn't get that silent knowledge that only transfers when you talk to people freely and meet with*

*people. So that really took time. So I think it took easily six months or something until I really started to feel that I'm part of this team, part of this company. [1A]*

*Now I needed to book a lot of meetings with people separately, I couldn't see and have the small talks and that sort of stuff as much. And I think it's very important with the onboarding as well to have those chitchats and other non-work-related topics, having those discussions as well, and get to know your colleagues. So I think that's a big part of onboarding process as well and I couldn't maybe have that. [8H]*

During the times of the pandemic, the importance of supervisors' support increased, however not all supervisors had the resources or abilities to be there for their team members in crisis. But those supervisors who managed to grow into their role even in uncertain times and were able to keep the communication honest and open in their teams are highly appreciated even after the pandemic.

*I think that my supervisor during the pandemic has been really supportive and have been focusing on the individual needs of each employee in each team, so that has been something because everyone experienced the pandemic so differently. So that is something that I really value. [2B]*

Experiencing and adapting to the changes that the pandemic introduced, did also create valuable learning experiences and gave people a chance to examine their working habits when they gained a wider perspective over those.

*I would say that I have learned a lot how my own mind behaves, how I develop bad habits, how I develop stress, how I develop anxiety during the pandemic. [1A]*

*I think that managing my personal stress and how much I have workload, so that has grown much more important recently. [2B]*

Working remotely had its' breakthrough, due to the pandemic. Organizations learned their employees are as effective when working from home as in the office. The flexibility of work is something that employees learned to appreciate and will not give up in post-

pandemic. It is important that companies retain the level of trust they gave to their employees during the pandemic and do not regress into old ways of working. According to the interviewees, the flexibility of work is essential for their success and work well-being.

*I value the flexibility and the ability to remote work, a lot more than before.  
[3C]*

*It gives me a lot of resources to succeed in my work life, if I have freedom.  
[7G]*

One interviewee shared their view on how trusting employees will result in better performance, as the employee feels appreciated.

*I personally believe that the more your employer trusts you, it's easier to live up to those expectations as well and I think if they give you freedom you want to respond well to it. You feel more ownership and you feel more appreciated.  
[8H]*

Being able to choose whether to work remotely or in the office and being able to build the working day schedules along with personal preferences is important for the interviewees. In long term, these learning outcomes from the times of the pandemic can be really valuable for the work well-being over the career.

*It (remote working) taught me to value the flexibility of remote working and how to organize your day during the remote day or days. So I think it affected a lot of how I'm living my working life at the moment. [7G]*

Overall, the pandemic accelerated important changes to take place globally in the local work environments, both regarding remote working and also digital transformation.

*I think that the biggest takeaway from the pandemic is that the threshold to do remote work has lowered. [8H]*

*I think the pandemic has given us a lot of new resources, that we didn't have in the pre-pandemic world. For example, all of the digital tools that we have nowadays and that enable us to work both remotely and from home office, and the hybrid work possibilities that we have nowadays. Because before*

*pandemic we really didn't have any processes on how people can work from multiple locations, how we can communicate effectively and manage the tasks across different teams. [2B]*

The implementation of these changes could have happened without the pandemic occurring, but it may have taken a longer period of time, nevertheless how differently the implementation processes would have been taking place in different countries and organizations.

*The pandemic has been good for companies that they have to have adapted to the modern age and they have now the technology to work at distance. [6F]*

## **5.2 Management of work well-being according to young adults**

In order to learn about the challenges of the management of young adults' work well-being in the post-pandemic work environment, young adults should be the ones sharing their experiences and views. Therefore, this chapter presents how the interviewed young adults perceive well-performed management of work well-being, what it consists of and how can it still be improved.

According to the interviewees, well-performed management of work well-being would consist of taking into account the individual needs of employees, giving them trust and flexibility, and making sure that there are enough resources for employees to utilize, so they will not have too big of a burden. Currently, the interviewees' workplaces are managing work well-being with different resources. Many companies utilize different well-being surveys and one-to-one conversations with supervisors.

*So we have bi-weekly one-to-ones, for example. Every week we have to fill in this form online, where there is different kind of questions about your week, what felt laborious, what felt good, and how did you feel about your work this week, and all that. Then you have to do that every week and sometimes in one-to-ones, they go straight to your next manager, you can have a chat about them, if they gone bad, worse or if you're just doing good all the time, that's, of course, a good sign. [4D]*

One interviewee shared how their workplace uses coach services, and employees can utilize a certain amount of hours to get help from a personal coach on their issues with work or personal life. According to the interviewees' their workplaces are managing their work well-being by giving them flexibility and trust in their work.

*I think right now it's very people-centric -approach. My employer tries to take all the individual needs into consideration. Not even regarding the place in which you work, like at home or at the office, also like I mentioned earlier, the time. So not everybody needs to be working at eight o'clock sharp and until four. You can come to work maybe even at ten if you want to and work until six, as long as you handle all the mandatory things with your colleagues like meetings and such. [8H]*

Whilst going through the pandemic, employees have had time to think and process what they value in workplaces. Now, after the pandemic, interviewed young adults are considering that companies should focus on individual needs more, as "people are at their best in multiple different ways", to be able to improve their management of work well-being.

*During the pandemic, all the people might have had more time to think about what they appreciate at workplaces and I think that if companies do not appreciate the opinions of their employees, then it's not a good way for the future. And they will lose their best employees if they do so. [7G]*

While others think that the changed needs after the pandemic are being acknowledged by employer organizations, some are still missing concrete actions.

The interviewees consider that by encouraging employees to set their boundaries between work and personal lives, companies could have better results in the long term, rather than having unsustainable short-term employment solutions.

*Companies should encourage people to find the boundaries between work and personal life. Because when people get exhausted when they get burned out, the company loses as well. The company should try to find people or*

*choose to try to make people behave in ways which lead to being a very, very good employee for the next 10 years, not only for the next six months. [1A]*

Therefore, the importance of resources is increasing when considering long-term solutions for the management of work well-being.

*I think it's very much about the resources because in the end if you don't have enough resources for your work then that affects the most for your well-being in the end. So that there is not too much burden on any employee. [6F]*

Interviewees agreed on how currently in their workplaces the work-life balance is well taken care of. Companies are tracking working hours and intervening if employees are working too much. The flexibility has risen into the discussion with interviewees when they have shared that it is rather easy to use their overtime hours and take free time.

*In our company, I feel like they really appreciate the work-life balance and it shows in different company levels. So my supervisor, she's always checking if the workload is good and that we don't have too much work, but also not too little work because it also might stress people that you can bore out if you're having too little work. [7G]*

Young adults, the interviewees, consider that challenges regarding the management of work well-being in organizations where they have worked have been about management, the feeling of community, and communication. Either the chosen managers are not performing well in their role, or they might not have the characteristics needed for the role to be successful in it:

*If I think of all the organizations that I've worked for, the biggest and by far the biggest challenge is manager who's very good at managing business, but very bad at managing people. [1A]*

Or possibly, the managers do not have enough resources allocated for their role from the organization level, and thereby their performance in their role will be influenced for that reason.

When discussing the challenges, one interviewee shared how they felt that communication from the managers of the organization was lacking during the pandemic. Due to the lack of communication, they did not know, for example, what was expected from them, or how they should perform in order to be successful in the new role.

*It wasn't communicated to me directly on what I need to do, establish and accomplish in order to be successful in this position I'm in. [...] I didn't know if it was just my manager, was it the company culture, or was it the remote working. [3C]*

Not only did the communication from the management level of the organization decrease but also communication between colleagues experienced a change. Joining the work community during uncertain times was also challenged by this change.

*[...] It's not just that it's harder for new people to join the community, but it also creates kind of cliques between those people who already know each other and they easily exclude people, who are the new joiners, from those cliques. And that also re-enforces those connections and it gives much bigger advantage to those people within the company, who had already established themselves in it, compared to those who are new joiners. [3C]*

*I think some challenges are if the organizations are managed from really high above and not listening to the employees perspective and actually concentrating on what is wrong and what needs to be improved. [2B]*

Regarding the solutions for these challenges of managing the work well-being of young adults, the interviewees considered that organizations should be interested in listening to their employees' opinions regarding the challenges in the company.

*I think listening to the employees is really vital and understanding what are the difficulties in each company is crucial to solving the problems, because without that it's just someone's opinion of what needs to be resolved and what needs to be focused on. And looking at the best practices of other companies is also a good idea, because sometimes even the employees that are working there might not have the idea of what could help them and what could be improved. [2B]*

Moreover, the importance of community and good workplace culture should be emphasized and worked for. Thereby employees can experience the value their workplace is giving to them.

*[...] Understand the value of the community, the working community in general, and try to encourage people come to the office and create the office into a place that people want to go to and people see value of going to. [3C]*

Trusting the employees to do their work and not micromanaging them, is really important for the overall work well-being. Since feeling trusted and valued in one's work will have an impact on one's well-being at work.

*The flexibility is very important, the trust is very important. Trust is not just easily given, but I think if you've been hired to do the job they've already trusted you quite a bit. They've hired you so they should have trust for you to make your own decisions and work like you want to work. [4D]*

*If the company culture promotes that, you don't really have to take everything out of yourself to the work and it's always enough if you do like 80-90% and not always 100%, because in the longer run it's not beneficial for yourself or not for the employer you are working for. [7G]*

## **6 Discussions and conclusions**

This study focused on the evolvement of the work well-being of young adults through the phases of the pandemic, and exploring how to manage the work well-being of young adults in the post-pandemic times. The pandemic times have been challenging for many, and young adults have been no exception (Van Mulukom et al., 2021). As found out in the study, young adulthood is a crucial time for the development of an individual, and events taking place can have long-term impacts on their future (Council et al., 2014, p. 124). Going through this kind of unexpected uncertainty during young adulthood put young adults in a situation where they needed to grieve lost opportunities and the time that they lost from their youth to the pandemic, as their everyday lives during the pandemic differed from the expectations.

In this section, the first two sub-chapters are for the discussion regarding the findings. Proceeding to the conclusions and the practical implications of the study. Lastly, the limitations of the study and suggestions for future research are given.

### **6.1 The impact of the pandemic on the resources and demands of work**

The interviewed young adults agreed that the pandemic increased their work demands but also gave them new resources for managing their work. According to Hobfoll (2002, p. 319), those who have more resources might cope better in stressful situations than those who have fewer. The pandemic introduced additional demands including a new kind of fear into the lives of many. The interviewees agreed on how they feared the pandemic and its possible impacts on their and their close ones' lives (Van Mulukom et al., 2021). Nevertheless, the management of the infectiousness of the disease did decrease the resources, as the social events and gatherings from the everyday lives of people were removed and people were moved to work from their own homes.

The time spent at home over the pandemic times, according to the interviewees gave them time more time to consider their careers in depth. In the early phases of the pandemic, working from home and having more time with family could impact resources positively for some, while for others it might have been challenging. When working from home, there was little-to-no diversity between days, young adults shared how they started to experience the days as repetitive and without rhythm. Commuting between work and home provided a natural break and separation between work and personal life. As the working environment changed and new ways of working were introduced, employees could rethink their personal working preferences, and understand better how they preferred to do their work.

Findings from the interviews support the suggestion of Vyas (2022, p. 159) of how the pandemic worked as an accelerator for the transition to remote working on a global level, as well as for the digital transformation. These are possibly the most important resources that the pandemic created, according to the interviewees. Employers are left with no other option than to trust their employees to do their work as well and efficiently from their home offices as before from office spaces. According to the interviewees, employees do appreciate the flexibility and trust they now receive from their employers. Having this type of freedom in their work influences their performance positively as they want to perform as worthy of the given trust. This supports the earlier findings of Hamouche (2021) regarding how sharing strategies and data with employees can support their successful performance, as well as the findings of Gabriel and Aguinis (2022, pp. 186-188) about the importance of having ownership of one's own work right from the start to support the process of identifying with their role at work. According to the interviewees, organizations should try to keep the gained new resources, such as the benefits of digital transformation and flexibility, well managed and up-to-date. They should be aware of not taking away the resources that were gained during the pandemic.

The flexibility of remote working might also have had negative impacts on the work well-being of some young adults. When being in the beginning of their career, young adults

might set unrealistic demands for themselves, they might feel the urge to prove themselves and their capability when starting to work full-time after their studies. In the interviews, the young adults also shared their perspectives on how older and more experienced colleagues have a better understanding of what is expected from them, and how they are willing to stand up for their boundaries on separating their working and personal lives.

It might have been a challenging time to start a career as a young adult during the pandemic when the responsibility of setting boundaries between work and home and taking care of the work well-being shifted more to the employees themselves. Even when young adults are more prone to perfectionism and workaholism, the circumstances of the pandemic might have increased the demands that young adults have set for themselves (Curran & Hill, 2019, pp. 419-421; Innanen et al., 2014). When young adults were responsible for evaluating whether they were doing enough work and performing well throughout the pandemic, according to one interviewee it felt like there would always be something more to achieve or to do better. Necessarily, the demands did not increase, but the changed circumstances influenced how the demands and performance were perceived. However, few of the interviewees stated how they learned to lower their own standards and value their health more, about which there is very limited evidence.

## **6.2 The management of work well-being**

Matters that are challenging the management of work well-being according to the interviewed young adults are related to the supervisor's work, communication, and the feeling of community at work. It was found in the study, how over the pandemic, the interviewees either noticed if their managers were performing well under the changed circumstances, or how they did not have the time and resources to perform well in their managerial role. For some of the interviewees, their managers might have been chosen for their roles for overall wrong reasons; they might be good at managing a business, but when it comes to managing people, they might not be performing up to standards.

Meanwhile, some managers might perform better when working under uncertainty rather than in normal conditions. One interviewee shared how well their workplace had supported them when they got long covid and needed to take part in different health controls and doctor's appointments. They were given more flexibility to do their work because they were not able to stay awake or perform as they would when they were healthy.

Overall, at the beginning of the pandemic, communication between colleagues, and from the management level to the employees weakened as discovered in the findings. Remote working, a decrease in social gatherings, and a lack of casual encounters in the office spaces negatively influenced the connections between coworkers. During the pandemic, networking and getting to know colleagues were challenged by the circumstances, therefore the creation of trust between coworkers slowed down. One of the interviewees shared how the communication regarding their new role and expectations toward them was weakly carried out and it felt challenging to create connections among new colleagues when onboarding and working remotely, and other people seemed to have their own cliques already. Overall, organizations and colleagues struggled to maintain a level of communication on a similar level during the pandemic as it was before. As found out in the study, digital miscommunication, such as a lack of informal and human interaction at work is a risk to employees' resources (Vyas, 2022, p. 161). As the pandemic progressed, the importance of communication and relations between colleagues to work well-being increased.

### **6.3 Conclusions**

In this thesis, it has been considered important to gather knowledge about how young employees might have experienced the times of pandemic, in order to understand their needs for the management of work well-being in the post-pandemic world. The aim of this research has been to answer the set research questions of how has the work well-being of young adults evolved during the Covid-19 pandemic and how can it be managed

in the post-pandemic era. This research met its objectives through the theoretical framework and conducted research interviews, therefore it is able to provide the following results.

According to the theoretical framework of the study, resources play significant roles in the work well-being of young adults. With the right resources, employees' motivation, engagement, and work performance can be improved, and they can be able to cope better with the demands of the work (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007, p. 313). The fast-phased changes related to the management of infectiousness started loss cycles when the adaptation skills of organizations and employees were challenged.

Going through young adulthood during a global pandemic is challenging; from missing out on your youth years to trying to graduate and starting to work while grieving missed opportunities. During the pandemic, work became more demanding when the responsibility of setting boundaries between work and home and taking care of work-life balance shifted more to the employees as discussed in section 6.1. In the changed work environment, employees also became the evaluators of whether they were doing enough work and performing well. For a young adult, at the beginning of their career, such responsibilities on top of the actual work tasks can cause additional stress and increase demands for oneself. The flexibility that the pandemic introduced into the work through remote work, might have left some of the young adults without the needed support at the beginning of one's career if the management during the pandemic had been lacking communication and there had not been a sense of community among colleagues.

The changes that the pandemic introduced to work life, according to the young adults interviewed, were not all bad as some of the changes turned out to be new resources to help them cope better with their work. Digital transformation and the possibility of remote working are improvements that are not given up on anymore. Organizations where managers understand how encouraging employees to set boundaries between their

work and personal lives is positively impacting their performance, are on the right path. Understanding the importance of allocating resources to managing young adults' well-being at work, as they have most of their careers ahead of them, is essential also for the future success of organizations. Rather than making short-term fixes, organizations should invest in long-term solutions for managing work well-being. When organizations are paying attention to the workplace culture, supporting work-life balance, and creating efficient performance management systems they may begin to understand better their employees and their state of work well-being.

In conclusion, the times of the pandemic introduced a lot of changes into people's lives globally, and the changes that took place in personal and work lives demanded a lot of adaptiveness. Therefore, in the post-pandemic period, it is important for organizations to help restore their employees' resources and support the work well-being of young adults by communicating with them openly about the resources that they would need to be able to succeed and enjoy their work while the uncertainty of the pandemic times subsides.

#### **6.4 Practical implications**

In this chapter, the practical implications of the study are presented, while answering the other part of the research question regarding how to manage the work well-being of young adults in the post-pandemic era, after learning how the pandemic times have influenced their needs for management of work well-being. The conducted research indicates a need to listen to the individuals and understand their current needs that might have changed due to the pandemic, to be better able to manage their work well-being.

From the interviews, it was found that the importance of resources such as supervisor support and the meaningfulness of the job rose to a new level because of the changes that the pandemic introduced. Those changes generated reconsideration of work and young adults began to look at their work from a different perspective. Nowadays, it is

not enough to have a great community at work, the work itself should be meaningful and motivating. Therefore, it is increasingly important for organizations to share responsibilities, listen to their employees' individual needs, and respond to their perhaps changed preferences (Gabriel & Aguinis, 2022, pp. 186-188).

As found through the interviews, the pandemic times revealed leaders who were able to adapt and manage well their employees through the uncertainty, and those who were not or did not have the resources to do so. In the post-pandemic, it is important for companies to learn from the pandemic times and be carefully selecting people who are working in managerial positions. The interviewed young adults shared how their managers hold one-on-one conversations with them, and they receive different well-being questionnaires from Human Resources -teams regularly. However, some of them were still unsure whether the results of those questionnaires have an impact, or they were missing concrete actions from their managers and HR teams. Azzouzi and Makkaoui (2022, p. 192) state how prioritizing and understanding employees better will be beneficial for the success of the organization. One interviewee shared how at their workplace, online well-being questionnaires take place on a weekly basis, and if there is anything negative or positive in the results then those will be discussed in the bi-weekly one-on-one meetings with the supervisors. Creating a habit of open and proactive communication between supervisors and employees is important, and enables better management of work well-being when the bar for honest well-being discussions is held low.

The need for support is at its' peak in the beginning of one's career, when everything is new and employees should learn about their responsibilities and demands, together with the organizational culture. The more there is to learn, the more burdening it is for young adults who are just starting their careers. These findings of the study support Microsoft's (2021, p. 32) recommendation of how a proper and well-thought-out onboarding process can be a great resource to help new employees adapt to their new work environment and buffer the demands that are all introduced to them at once. Over

uncertain times such as the pandemic, stability and reassurance from company communication might be even more needed than in general.

How organizations respond to and manage surprising or new situations in uncertain times, shares about their values and caring for their employees. A good example of this was the support that one interviewee received from their workplace when they were struggling with the long covid. Organizations should keep adjusting their procedures to improve the long-term work well-being of young adults in the post-pandemic times, according to their current needs for resources that support their well-being at work. It is important to understand what resources employees need from the organization to feel good about their work and to agree together on how will they communicate if the demands of the work are feeling overwhelming. Open communication regarding the state of work well-being could enable implementing accurate responses within the right scope to well-being matters.

## **6.5 Limitations and future research**

In this chapter, the limitations of the study are briefly described. When conducting a qualitative research study with a relatively small interviewee group, certain limitations can be encountered. For example, the sample size of nine interviewees might limit the generalizability of the findings and how they would represent a broader population. Since the group of interviewees are all alumni of the University of Vaasa, it is necessary to take into account the sampling bias, as the interviewees might not fully represent the diversity or range of perspectives within the target population. Thereby it is also possible to have limited perspectives, when there is a risk of not having certain aspects of the research topic explored adequately due to the number of interviewees.

There are a few suggestions for future research, and the first of them comes from the limitations of this study. It would be interesting to know whether the findings would differ if the sample size would be bigger and a broader population would be presented,

including people who are located outside of Europe. Secondly, as this research focuses only on young adults' work well-being experience during the pandemic, and how their work well-being should be managed in the post-pandemic period, for future research it would be interesting to learn more about the same topics from the point-of-view of organizations. For example, how do they consider their successes and failures in the management of work well-being in the different phases of the pandemic, and how do they utilize the learnings from the times of the pandemic in current times when building sustainable work well-being management. Lastly, regarding work well-being and employee retention, another interesting topic to research in the future would be to look into how employee retention differs in companies that have successfully onboarded and managed young adults during the pandemic, in comparison with companies where the onboarding process during the pandemic has been performed less successfully.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1. Interview themes and questions

#### Descriptive part:

- Please, could you tell me your name and age?
- What is your educational background?
- Where do you work currently? What is your profession or job title? What is the type of your employer organization? Where is your work located?
- How long have you worked in your current workplace? How about your previous experience?
- What is your marital status? Do you live alone or with a spouse or children?

#### Exploratory part:

##### Work well-being

- How do you consider the matter of work well-being? What does it consist of for you?
- How would you describe your work well-being before the pandemic?
- How has the pandemic impacted your resources and work demands? From the beginning to the current.
- How has your work well-being evolved while your work has gone through changes?
- Do you think that the work well-being experience differs between young adults and older employees? Why so?

##### Work well-being in different phases of Covid-19

- We have three phases of the pandemic under discussion; the pandemic phase, the post-peak period, and the post-pandemic period, in which phase do you consider we are currently regarding the pandemic?
- How did you experience the times of the pandemic? Anything positive or negative?
- How did Covid-19 impact your working habits? What changed? Work-from-home?
- Did the pandemic influence the demands that you set for yourself personally? How?
- How would you describe the impact that the pandemic related restrictions have had on your work wellbeing?
- What did you consider important to your work well-being before the pandemic?
  - During the pandemic phase and post-peak period?
  - During the post-pandemic period?
  - Have these changed, why?

- What was challenging your work well-being before the pandemic?
  - During the pandemic phase and post-peak period?
  - During the post-pandemic period?
  - Have these changed, why?
- Do you think companies should learn something or change somehow after the pandemic? What or How?
- What is the current model of working your workplace is using; remote, hybrid, at office or something else?

#### Management of work well-being

- How would you describe well-performed management of work well-being?
- How is work well-being taken care of at your workplace currently?
- Have you noticed if your workplace has changed its perception of work well-being over the times of the pandemic? How?
- Do you think that the company in which you are currently working is acknowledging the changed needs of employees for work well-being after the pandemic?
- How have the organizations in which you have worked and the supervisors there, supported you during the pandemic?
- How is your work-life balance acknowledged by your employer organization?
- Describe what kind of challenges regarding the management of work well-being you have noticed in organizations in which you have worked.
- How do you think the challenges related to the management of work well-being, could be solved? What is needed more and what is less?