

# Between Leaders and Followers: Developing a Relational Leadership Framework for a Virtual Work Context in Professional Service Firms

Felizitas Wenzel (41633) & Artturi Pulkkinen (41601)

## Abstract

Virtual work has steadily gained popularity in the last decades, and this development has been further accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and the first half of 2021. With clear benefits such as increased flexibility and reduced commuting times, it is speculated that a significant amount of work will continue to be virtual, even after the pandemic. However, virtual work can create various challenges to organizations, especially in regard to leadership and interorganizational relationships. Despite years of research, the effects of full-time virtual work on leadership are still poorly understood, especially in professional service firms (PSFs) that are characterized by collective leadership, ambiguous authority, and social learning. Drawing from social constructionism, newer approaches such as relational leadership, and the existing virtual work and PSF literature, this thesis sets out to explore the effects of virtual work on the relationships and interactions between leaders and followers, and to conceptualize relational leadership in PSFs.

For a qualitative case study with a global leadership advisory firm, empirical data was gathered through 24 semi-structured interviews. Three distinct types of interactions were identified based on coding and subsequent thematic analysis: project interactions, development interactions, and socialization interactions. Furthermore, seven tensions between leaders and followers within these interaction types were found by comparing and contrasting differing patterns in leaders' and followers' descriptions of the same situations: Stressing demands versus personal commitment, efficiency fallacy versus workload awareness, vanishing in the background versus proactive exposure, giving feedback versus avoiding conflict, getting the job done versus maintaining personal relationships, maintaining team spirit versus formalizing interactions, and longing for interaction versus resigning in isolation. The findings were interpreted by using previously reviewed PSF and virtual work literature, indicating the influence of leadership dynamics and contextual challenges on the leader-follower interactions in constructing relational leadership. Based on the empirical analysis and the theoretical foundation, a new conceptualization of relational leadership is proposed. The new framework seeks to provide a tool for future researchers to study relational leadership, for organizations to identify potential challenges in virtual work, and for leaders and followers to learn about dynamics and potential tensions within their own relationships.

**Keywords:** Relational Leadership, Virtual Work, Followership, Leadership, Professional Service Firms

**Supervisor:** Emma Stenström

**Submitted on** May 16, 2021

# Acknowledgements

It was a great pleasure to dive deep into the relationship between leaders and followers and grow personally alongside our thesis. Writing these lines, we look back at five months of hard work, endless learnings and great people who played an invaluable part in writing our thesis.

We want to express our gratitude towards our case company for embarking on this challenging adventure with us, supporting us throughout the whole process and towards such insightful findings. We are very much looking forward to starting an internal workshop series together and putting our results into practice.

This study has shown once more how every single perspective matters! We want to thank all our 21 interviewees for their openness, trust, and insights - every single one provided a great contribution towards our final thesis.

Our amazing supervisor Emma Stenström has played a great role in providing guidance while we continuously bounced between theory and empirics, giving constructive feedback for slowly circling in on our findings, and continuously providing inspiration.

This thesis would not be the same without our incredible parents, partners, and fellow students who guided, supported, and accompanied us with infinite feedback, motivation, and high spirits.

Thank you!

# Table of Contents

1	Introduction.....	1
1.1	Research Purpose .....	1
1.2	Expected Contribution .....	2
1.3	Disposition .....	2
2	Literature Review and Theoretical Framework .....	3
2.1	Professional Service Firms.....	3
2.2	Emergence of Relational Leadership .....	3
2.2.1	Social Construction of Leadership .....	3
2.2.2	The Role of Followers.....	4
2.2.3	Relational Leadership.....	4
2.2.4	Virtual Work .....	5
2.3	Leadership Dynamics in Professional Service Firms .....	5
2.3.1	Collective Leadership.....	6
2.3.2	Social Learning and Transformational Leadership .....	6
2.3.3	Reciprocal Influence .....	7
2.4	Challenges of Virtual Work .....	7
2.4.1	Isolation and Work-Life Conflict.....	8
2.4.2	Loss of Identification and Trust .....	8
2.4.3	Shallow Communication .....	9
2.4.4	Inflexible Leadership.....	9
2.5	Research Gap .....	10
2.6	Theoretical Framework .....	10
3	Methodology and Methods .....	13
3.1	Research Approach .....	13
3.2	Research Method.....	13
3.3	Research Case Company.....	14
3.4	Data Collection .....	15
3.4.1	Participant Sampling .....	15
3.4.2	Semi-Structured Interviews.....	16
3.4.3	Interview Guide.....	16
3.4.4	Interview Setting .....	17
3.4.5	Pilot Phase .....	17
3.4.6	Data Collection Phase .....	17
3.4.7	Follow-Up Phase .....	17
3.5	Data Analysis .....	18
3.5.1	Data Analysis Method.....	18
3.5.2	Data Analysis Process .....	18
3.6	Quality Considerations.....	19
3.6.1	Reliability .....	19
3.6.2	Validity.....	19
3.6.3	Transferability .....	20

3.7	Ethical Considerations .....	20
4	Empirical Result.....	21
4.1	Project Interactions .....	21
4.1.1	Stressing Demands vs. Personal Commitment.....	21
4.1.2	Efficiency Fallacy vs. Workload Awareness .....	23
4.2	Development Interactions .....	26
4.2.1	Vanishing in the Background vs. Proactive Exposure .....	26
4.2.2	Giving Feedback vs. Avoiding Conflict.....	29
4.3	Socialization Interactions .....	31
4.3.1	Getting the Job Done vs. Maintaining Personal Relationships .....	31
4.3.2	Maintaining Team Spirit vs. Formalizing Interactions .....	33
4.3.3	Longing for Interaction vs. Resigning in Isolation .....	35
5	Analysis.....	37
5.1	The Construction of Relational Leadership .....	37
5.2	Project Interactions .....	37
5.3	Development Interactions .....	39
5.4	Socialization Interactions .....	40
6	Discussion .....	43
6.1	Completion of Theoretical Framework .....	43
6.2	Elaboration of Findings and Learnings .....	44
6.2.1	Seeing the Full Contextual Picture .....	44
6.2.2	Acknowledging Constructionism in Relational Leadership.....	44
6.2.3	Understanding (Inter-)Dependencies in Relational Leadership .....	44
7	Concluding Remarks.....	46
7.1	Addressing the Research Question .....	46
7.2	Theoretical Contribution .....	46
7.3	Practical Contribution .....	47
7.4	Limitation.....	47
7.5	Future Research.....	48
8	Bibliography/References.....	49
9	Appendix.....	55
9.1	Interview Guide.....	55
9.2	Coding Scheme and Overview of Interviewees Mentioning Each Code .....	57
9.3	Respondent Validation from Case Company.....	60
9.4	Additional Quotes from Empirical Results .....	61

## List of Figures

Figure 1: Theoretical Framework I.....	11
Figure 2: Theoretical Framework II – Theoretical Findings .....	12
Figure 3: Overview of Interviewees .....	16
Figure 4: Abductive Approach .....	19
Figure 5: Theoretical Framework III – Empirical Findings .....	43
Figure 6: Theoretical Framework IV – Conceptualization for Future Research .....	47

# 1 Introduction

With a high degree of flexibility and potential positive impact on performance, environment, and people, a certain level of virtual work is being traded as the future way of working (Contreras et al., 2020; Kossek et al., 2006; Vega et al., 2015). As virtual work creates new challenges that impede face-to-face leadership, companies need to adjust their structures and promote employee well-being to support trustful relationships and stay competitive (Contreras et al., 2020). Different forms of virtual work have gained popularity and created the technological requirements over the last decades, and in 2019 about 70% of office workers globally worked remotely once a week, and 53% for more than half of the week (He et al., 2020). For a great part of 2020 and 2021, the COVID-19 pandemic has made social distancing compulsory, confined more than 3.5 billion people to their homes and forced firms to shift to virtual work whenever possible, enforcing millions to work virtually every day (Bouziri et al., 2020; World Health Organization, 2020). Thereby, the pandemic accelerated the transition to virtual work, and as companies and employees have now experienced the benefits, it is speculated that a greater degree of virtual work will become “the new global work norm” after the pandemic (Contreras et al., 2020). While the pandemic challenged companies to steer through a crisis, it also required adjusting the way of working and impacted the relationship between employees and employers (Contreras et al., 2020). The current phase of enforced virtual work presents an unprecedented case that emphasizes the importance of healthy and trustworthy relationships at work and can be used to learn about potential challenges to prepare for a potential new norm.

Among other industries, professional service firms (PSF), such as consultancies, were forced to shift to virtual work. Despite their traditionally high degree of travelling and face-to-face interactions, the PSF industry has traditionally the highest percentage of working remotely in an industry comparison (Gardner & Lister, 2017). However, virtual work has barely been studied in academic PSF research so far (Bartsch et al., 2020). With their collective leadership and high degree of social learning, the relations between leaders and followers are of great relevance for their business success (Denis et al., 2012; Empson, 2017; Sandvik et al., 2019). As virtual work has highlighted the impediment of leadership and the importance of relationships, the interactions between leaders and followers move to the center of attention. Relational leadership connects these aspects, as it is constructed through interactions between leaders and followers and adapts to changes in context, such as virtual work (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011; Uhl-Bien, 2006). Thus, the perspectives of leaders and followers have to be considered together, as differences can hint towards potential challenges in their relationship that can generate learnings for future virtual work situations.

## 1.1 Research Purpose

In this thesis, we seek to understand how relationships between leaders and followers in PSFs unfold in the context of virtual work. We use a case study to illustrate leaders’ and followers’ perspectives of mutual interactions in virtual work, by combining relational leadership with the recent empirical context of virtual work while taking a constructionist theoretical view. Thereby,

we aim to develop a context-sensitive framework conceptualizing relational leadership in PSFs and explore the following research question:

*How are the leader-follower relationships and interactions in professional service firms affected by virtual work, and how can relational leadership be conceptualized?*

## 1.2 Expected Contribution

Even though constructionist researchers agree that both, leaders and followers, play a role in constructing leadership, and relational leadership researchers emphasize that leadership evolves through the interactions between leaders and followers, there is limited research on the relation between leaders and followers in PSFs, and there does not exist a framework for relational leadership yet. As researchers highlight the need to study the effect of external impacts on PSFs (Empson et al., 2015), virtual work and the accompanying challenges constitute an external impact worth studying as it remains understudied despite the effect of COVID-19 (Bartsch et al., 2020). With the expected future virtual way of working, relational leadership in the virtual work context in PSFs will become and remain even more important (Contreras et al., 2020).

Beyond the academic contribution, we seek to provide insights into leader-follower relationships in virtual work to enable organizations to get a better understanding and prepare for a successful new working norm with a high degree of virtual work. Further, the framework to approach and interpret relational leadership through the different interactions between leaders and followers can potentially be used beyond PSFs and the virtual work context.

## 1.3 Disposition

To conceptualize relational leadership in virtual work in PSFs, this thesis first establishes the underlying theoretical framework by reviewing related literature to identify relevant leadership dynamics and virtual work challenges (chapter 2). Next, the research approach, data collection, and analysis methods are elaborated (chapter 3), before the empirical findings from our case study are presented (chapter 4) as well as interpreted with reference to the theoretical foundation (chapter 5). On this basis, we complement the initial framework with our empirical insights (chapter 6) before we relate back to our research question in the concluding remarks (chapter 7).

## 2 Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

In this chapter, we first explore the characteristics that define PSFs, before discussing the shifting focus of leadership research from individual leaders and followers to the relationships between them. Subsequently, we look at existing studies exploring leadership dynamics in PSFs. Then, we discuss virtual work literature to derive the challenges that constitute the context of this study. Finally, we summarize the research gap and derive the theoretical framework.

### 2.1 Professional Service Firms

The core purpose of PSFs is to deliver tailored solutions to customers using expert knowledge (Empson, 2017). Thus, they mostly consist of experts with a high degree of autonomy, that is derived from their knowledge and value generating client contacts. This autonomy is in perpetual tension with contingent authority, as the experts in PSFs only accept directions from those they consider worthy (*ibid.*). As the formal leadership positions are awarded by elections and rely on the consent of peers, leadership mostly comes directly from peers without formal authority (*ibid.*). Therefore, leadership in PSFs cannot be captured by analyzing a single leader, as there often is no such person to analyze (*ibid.*).

Empson (2017) and Hinings et al. (2015) define PSFs by four criteria: (1) They apply specialist technical knowledge to offer customized solutions, (2) the organizations' core assets are the experts and their technical knowledge, (3) the experts are rather autonomous and in charge of the leadership, and (4) the experts recognize themselves as such, as do clients and competitors. In a broader sense, a PSF can be understood as any organization that operates within a knowledge-intensive industry (Hinings et al., 2015). Even though there is no universally accepted definition among the research community, the definitions are very similar and we will use the definition by Empson (2017) and Hinings et al. (2015).

### 2.2 Emergence of Relational Leadership

Leadership research has taken many forms over the last decades, as academics have studied various organizations to learn what makes specific firms or leaders effective and successful, but no universal definition exists for leadership (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003; Jackson & Parry, 2011; Northouse, 2019). It is mostly agreed that leadership differs from management, transcends the pure issuing and executing of orders in a hierarchical organization, is rather future looking and visionary, and can be understood as a process (Kotter, 2001; Northouse, 2019; Zaleznik, 1992), although contrasting views exist as well (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003; Gemmill & Oakley, 1992). This chapter describes the development of leadership and followership research towards relational leadership.

#### 2.2.1 Social Construction of Leadership

Constructionism as an ontological position holds the view that social phenomena are created by the interplay between social actors, and is thus conceptually opposed to objectivism, where social phenomena are seen as disconnected from people (Bryman & Bell, 2015). With roots dating back to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Berger and Luckman popularized the idea that rather than some objective



truth waiting to be found, the world is constructed through social interactions (Cunliffe, 2008; Fairhurst & Grant, 2010), a view that has been adopted by numerous researchers (Fairhurst & Grant, 2010). The implication from an organizational perspective is then that a phenomenon such as leadership can only be understood through those who are a part of it: the leaders and followers (Bell & Thorpe, 2013). Instead of existing in itself and being observable from the outside, leadership is seen as a social construct that can only be understood through the interactions of organizational members and the context within which it happens.

### 2.2.2 The Role of Followers

Some constructionist researchers argue that the leader-centric approach has led to an over-attribution of organizational outcomes to leadership (Bligh & Schyns, 2007; Meindl, 1995). Thus, the importance of social construction of leadership and mutual constitution of leader-follower relations have gained relevance (Bligh & Schyns, 2007; Riggio, 2020). Consequently, the construction of leadership is being increasingly studied from a follower-centric perspective and includes variations of leadership in follower's engagement with work (e.g., self-leadership) and colleagues (e.g., shared leadership) (Bligh & Schyns, 2007; Carsten et al., 2010). As with leadership, followership can be understood as a social construction impacted by context created by leaders and organization (Carsten et al., 2010). The constructionist approach to followership considers the flexibility of being a leader in some and a follower in other situations, regardless of formal hierarchical positions (Bastardoz & Van Vugt, 2019). As the term followership is often negatively connotated, alternate terms such as 'constituent', 'collaborator' and 'citizen' have been suggested. However, 'followership' has gained traction in academic research in recent years, and Riggio (2020; 2014) advocates for legitimizing the term 'follower' through emphasizing their role in leadership. Therefore, the term 'follower' will be used throughout this thesis.

### 2.2.3 Relational Leadership

Uhl-Bien (2006) argues that most of the studies of leadership relations can be divided into two broader perspectives, (1) the entity perspective and (2) the relational perspective. Even though the entity perspective examines relationships, the focus is still on individuals, their behavior and traits, and the types and qualities of specific relationships. A prominent example is the leader-member exchange theory (LMX), which attempts to determine the key factors for effective leadership by identifying characteristics and traits of individuals that are part of the leader-follower dyad. LMX and other entity perspectives conceptualize the world from a realist ontology and assume organizations to be structures already in place and ready to be studied. However, the relational perspective shifts the focus away from individuals to the processes that create organizational and relational realities (ibid.): Organizations are assumed to be networks of people and relationships, and to study an organization, research has to be based on a more constructionist approach. Both perspectives build on important similarities (ibid.): They focus on the relationships of organizational personnel and differentiate leadership from management and formal hierarchical structures. Leadership does not need to occur between a manager and an employee but can occur between anyone. However, the major differences between both perspectives lie in the underlying ontologies and methodologies. Whereas the entity perspective assumes that every individual has their own independent reality, the relational perspective supposes that every relationship shapes its own reality (ibid.).

To produce a more comprehensive view of leadership in organizations, Uhl-Bien (2006: 666) introduces the Relational Leadership Theory, a framework to “enhance our understanding of relational dynamics”. Relational Leadership Theory can be seen as a combination of the two previously presented perspectives: It calls for studies that investigate the relational processes of leadership rather than leadership effectiveness and builds on the notion that leadership occurs not just between managers and employees but “throughout the organization” (Uhl-Bien, 2006: 668). As Cunliffe and Eriksen (2011) note, relational leadership is not a model of leadership in a traditional sense, but rather an approach that recognizes the limitations of conceptualizing leadership as an attribute or a characteristic of either the leader or the follower. Furthermore, it expands the idea of leadership as a social construction by suggesting that leadership is not only a construction created by individuals themselves, but something that is created together through relationships and interactions.

#### 2.2.4 Virtual Work

As constructionist research has shown, context plays a role in the construction of leadership between leaders and followers. Virtual work, telework, telecommuting, remote work, distance work – the lack of physical presence in the organization with a certain degree of flexibility regarding working hours and locations enabled by advanced information and communication technologies – has many names and presents a new context for socially constructed leadership (Contreras et al., 2020; Cortellazzo et al., 2019). While telework involves only a few days per week away from the office, virtual work describes an almost full-time working mode in a remote setting (Golden & Fromen, 2011). This study will focus on virtual work, assuming almost full-time work away from the office, to generate learnings to prepare for a future way of working comprising virtual or teleworking.

So far, virtual work’s impact on leadership has mainly been studied from a leader-centered perspective with focus on effective leadership behavior or challenges related to trust, communication, and engagement (Contreras et al., 2020). Research with a focus on followers has primarily focused on individual well-being, work-life balance, and motivation (Kossek et al., 2006). Regarding the relationship between leaders and followers, there are studies on how the distance between home and office alters the quality of relationships and related job satisfaction (Golden, 2006). Research of virtual work in PSFs has focused on virtual teamwork as a potential consulting service offering (Jünemann & Lloyd, 2003), individual leadership behavior (Bartsch et al., 2020), or included PSFs as one of many study objects (Maruyama & Tietze, 2012; Wakefield et al., 2008). While the challenges, required conditions, and leadership styles vary with the degree of virtuality, and most prior research has focused on teleworking (Gajendran & Harrison, 2006; Gerda et al., 2011), the high degree of virtual work caused by the pandemic is expected to emphasize the requirements on leaders and followers for an effective virtual work environment (Cortellazzo et al., 2019).

### 2.3 Leadership Dynamics in Professional Service Firms

As relational leadership is constructed through interactions between leaders and followers, it is important to understand the underlying dynamics that shape these interactions. Therefore, this

chapter depicts the recurring leadership dynamics that were identified in our literature review of leaders and followers in PSFs.

### 2.3.1 Collective Leadership

Whereas leadership in hierarchical organizations equates mostly with management, leadership in PSFs is more about influence that flows from peer to peer and can thus be mostly characterized as ambiguous (Empson, 2017; Empson, 2020; Langley & Empson, 2015). Since the experts are autonomous, leadership becomes shared and can best be captured with newer frameworks such as plural leadership, that view leadership as a process in which multiple actors are constantly interacting and influencing each other (Denis et al., 2012; Empson, 2017; Langley & Empson, 2015). These approaches conceptualize leadership less as actions taken by specific people, and more as something that continuously occurs between peers in the background (Empson & Alvehus, 2020).

Thus, leadership is very personal and linked to specific professionals instead of a formal position. While elected leaders are to a certain degree responsible for strategic planning and setting new directions, the expert autonomy limits this managerial leadership and shifts the leader role more to those who set an example and support others in the organization. Empson (2017) argues that there are three separate microdynamics that together explain how leadership is ‘co-constructed’ in PSFs: (1) legitimizing, (2) negotiating, and (3) maneuvering. By acquiring customers and creating measurable value, professionals legitimize their position among their peers. Maneuvering is essential in becoming a leader, as the professionals must engage in political behavior, all the while appearing apolitical. Because of the high degree of autonomy of the experts in PSFs, anyone elected to a leadership position must constantly negotiate with their peers, balancing between authority and autonomy. Together, these three separate yet intertwined dynamics highlight the perpetual motion of leadership and power relations in PSFs (ibid.).

### 2.3.2 Social Learning and Transformational Leadership

Langley and Empson (2015) identified three ways of how leadership is manifested in PSFs that center around the personal interaction between two professionals targeting mutual improvement: (1) Coaching refers to knowledge transfer from senior to junior professionals that goes beyond purely technical skills, (2) nurturing describes the subtle ways by which leaders motivate and encourage others and seek to make them feel appreciated, and (3) role-modeling is tightly linked to the previously discussed legitimacy: To influence other experts by their active behavior, professionals must act as an example of what it means to be a professional. The concepts of legitimizing (chapter 2.2.1) and role-modeling fall in line with social learning theory, which asserts that members of an organization take cues from their environment and imitate their leaders’ behavior (Empson, 2017; Sandvik et al., 2019). As a result, intrinsically motivated employees take up tasks and responsibilities usually performed by their leaders, which increases their engagement in decision-processes, improves their performance, and prepares them for future leadership positions (Sandvik et al., 2019).

Even though leadership in PSFs is highly dispersed, elements of transformational leadership behavior can be seen: transformational leaders motivate others to do more than they thought they would or could do by giving them intellectually stimulating tasks that require more sophisticated

thinking, thereby acting charismatic and inspiring through their own actions (Bass, 1985; Bass, 1999). As the professionals at PSFs are described as autonomous, yet collectively responsible for the organizational success, they prove their own competence by leading by example, while engaging junior members with rather demanding tasks, thereby promoting self-leadership and intellectual stimulation (Empson, 2017; Langley & Empson, 2015; Sandvik et al., 2019). Transformational leadership thus captures the qualities that individual leaders in PSFs demonstrate to motivate and influence their followers.

### 2.3.3 Reciprocal Influence

According to Empson (2017), a combination of insecurity, social control and overwork creates an identity that characterizes employees across all levels of PSFs, termed ‘the insecure overachievers’. Belonging to an elite organization becomes an elementary part of new joiners whose uncertainty is amplified through competitive up-or-out policies, increasingly complex problems, and continuous learning. The continuous need to get positive feedback from peers and leaders can be found at all levels of PSFs, motivates professionals to perform better than their peers and often results in ‘voluntary’ overwork. By conforming to these mechanisms, professionals in PSFs role-model this behavior and continuously co-create and reinforce social control (Empson, 2017; Lupu & Empson, 2015).

As leader and follower dynamics in PSFs remain under-studied (Riggio, 2014), Empson (2017) refers to a reciprocal influence between leaders and followers which we elaborate on using non-PSF-specific literature. Carsten et al. (2010) differentiate three types of followers: while (1) passive followers simply obey orders, (2) active followers express their opinions when asked but remain loyal and compliant even if they do not agree with their leaders’ actions, and (3) proactive followers however identify themselves as active participants in the leadership process, challenging their leaders while working towards the organization’s benefit (ibid.). A related concept is stewardship, which refers to followers ‘going the extra mile’ to achieve their organization’s best interests and is driven by high levels of trust within the organization as well as the leaders’ transparent commitment to act in the interest of their employees and role-modeling the desired values (Cameron, 2011; Hayes et al., 2015). Various researchers have highlighted the desirability of proactive followers, who are willing to take initiative, challenge their leader’s thinking and contribute to the leader’s effectiveness and outcome (Carsten et al., 2010; Finlayson & Harvey, 2016). As followership is subject to changing corporate context and environment (Carsten et al., 2010), as well as leadership styles and followers’ goals and challenges (Bastardo & Van Vugt, 2019), proactive followership requires understanding and enablement from an organizational perspective and calls for a broader understanding of leadership. At the same time, followership researchers argue that also followers influence their leaders (Finlayson & Harvey, 2016; Oc & Bashshur, 2013). In turn, Oc & Bashshur (2013) argue that leaders’ perception and preference of follower behavior, as well as their information dependency, might amplify or attenuate the followers’ influence. This mutual influence of leaders and followers is central to the understanding of the social construction of leadership.

## 2.4 Challenges of Virtual Work

Enhancing productivity, increasing job satisfaction, and relieving stressors on people and the environment - While the potential advantages of virtual work are rather undisputed, they often

depend on the (perceived) degree of flexibility in virtual work choices (Contreras et al., 2020; Fonner & Roloff, 2010; Kossek et al., 2006). Moreover, they also require the right organizational conditions to respond to the challenges and risks associated with virtual work (Kossek et al., 2006). This chapter summarizes the challenges of virtual work for leaders and followers.

#### 2.4.1 Isolation and Work-Life Conflict

The physical distance from co-workers and the lack of personal interaction, face-to-face knowledge-sharing, and co-learning can create professional isolation that has proven to negatively affect motivation and performance and can increase turnover intentions (Golden et al., 2008; Wojcak et al., 2016). Particularly new employees have difficulties establishing personal relationships with co-workers and risk becoming isolated in virtual settings (Wojcak et al., 2016). At the same time, virtual work can reduce the visibility of employees' performance which can lead to personal anxiety about shrinking career development opportunities (Maruyama & Tietze, 2012) and loss of faith in their own skills, knowledge, and abilities (Golden et al., 2008).

The flexibility of virtual work has the potential to improve work-life balance, but can also increase availability and constant connectivity, thereby diminishing boundaries between private and professional life. Consequently, studies have shown that virtual employees work longer hours, face an increased workload, and feel pressured to constantly stay connected and respond in a rapid manner (Bathini et al., 2019; Eddleston & Mulki, 2017; Schwarzmüller et al., 2018). The increased workload and stress levels for employees can in turn increase the leaders' workload to support their followers (Schwarzmüller et al., 2018). Schwarzmüller et al. (2018) thus call for an increased awareness for employees' health and for leaders to role-model healthy work arrangements.

Further, diffusing work and family boundaries can increase the transfer of negative incidents from work to family environment (Eddleston & Mulki, 2017; Gajendran & Harrison, 2006; Kossek et al., 2006). Kossek et al. (2006: 361) conclude that employee satisfaction, family-work conflicts, and turnover intentions depend on the perceived job control: The degree to which employees feel they have "control over when, where and how they work" contributes directly to individual well-being, even more than the amount of time worked virtually.

#### 2.4.2 Loss of Identification and Trust

Before the recent obligation of virtual work, managers' mistrust in employees' willingness and ability to perform in their absence was identified as a crucial concern inhibiting virtual work. This can be traced back to the reduced visibility of employees' performance as well as the increased requirement of self-organization and time management skills in virtual work settings (Kaplan et al., 2018). Thus, the increased autonomy in virtual settings is often met by normative control mechanisms that further increase workload and work efforts for the employee (Bathini et al., 2019; Cortellazzo et al., 2019). The enhanced transparency of individual performance due to virtual collaboration tools increases performance pressure and emphasizes the importance of leaders' support of professional development (Gupta & Pathak, 2018; Schwarzmüller et al., 2018).

As corporate culture is continuously formed by collective experience, the lack of physical contact with co-workers makes virtual workers lose contact with organizational reality, further increasing professional isolation (Wojcak et al., 2016). At the same time, new team members joining virtually

experience difficulties internalizing the culture of the company as informal power and knowledge structures remain hidden (ibid.). This illustrates how difficult it is to build and maintain a trusting leader-follower relationship in virtual work. As trust in virtual settings requires actions rather than goodwill, expectations and actions should be made explicit and visible to create trust (Malhotra et al., 2007).

### 2.4.3 Shallow Communication

As the reliability on digital information and communication technologies challenges previous modes of communication and enhances any pre-existing communication difficulties, the effectiveness of leadership in virtual work requires even more communication, motivational language, and virtual presence to foster trust and a sense of connectedness within the team (Cortellazzo et al., 2019; Gupta & Pathak, 2018). As auditory and visual cues that usually communicate subtle messages and support understanding are easily missed out on in virtual communication, the overall flow of information is reduced, misunderstandings occur more easily, the perception of leaders can be distorted and followers' feelings can be misunderstood (Cortellazzo et al., 2019; Darics, 2020; Golden & Veiga, 2008; Wojcak et al., 2016). As a result, communication in virtual work context is "less likely to engender feelings of involvement with another and may therefore be less personally fulfilling, leading work-based relationships to suffer" (Golden, 2006: 322). While employees might aim to compensate the lack of face-to-face interactions through vigilant virtual communication, the quality of relationships and related job satisfaction tend to decrease over time (ibid.).

As virtual communication aggravates informal exchange, knowledge sharing is inhibited as it often takes the form of informal, anecdotal stories that are spontaneously shared in face-to-face settings, even though it is crucial for organizational learning and individual career advancement. The approachability needed for knowledge sharing requires trust, interpersonal bonding, and organizational attachment, especially in virtual work (Golden & Raghuram, 2010; Wojcak et al., 2016). Therefore, Maruyama & Tietze (2012) recommend to consciously make room for mentoring, networking, and other professional development activities in virtual work.

According to the LMX theory, the lack of face-to-face interaction, increasing social isolation, and loss of non-verbal cues decrease satisfaction with the supervisor and the overall job, and reduce organizational commitment (Golden, 2006; Golden & Veiga, 2008). To make virtual communication work, efficient virtual teams establish and continuously review norms regarding communication technology usage: Through monitoring the usage of different communication patterns, support needs can be identified and directly addressed, and less visible employees targeted and integrated (Cortellazzo et al., 2019; Malhotra et al., 2007). As virtual workers tend to get less informal feedback due to reduced monitoring and less frequent touchpoints, formal appraisal systems are even more important than in face-to-face settings (Gajendran & Harrison, 2006; Mihailova, 2017; Wojcak et al., 2016).

### 2.4.4 Inflexible Leadership

As virtual work requires flexibility, researchers call for more collective leadership and shared responsibility as the ability of individual leaders to exert direct influence on followers decreases (Cortellazzo et al., 2019; Gupta & Pathak, 2018; Hoegl & Muethel, 2016). This is accelerated as

digital tools enable real-time participation of employees in organizational decision-making, further decentralizing power (Cortellazzo et al., 2019; Schwarzmüller et al., 2018). As a result of the changing demands and increasing autonomy in the context of virtual work, successful leaders coordinate leadership activities, and exhibit coaching behavior and relationship-oriented leadership (Cortellazzo et al., 2019; Nordbäck & Espinosa, 2019; Schwarzmüller et al., 2018). Further, a more inclusive leadership style is required to encourage autonomy, collaboration, and responsibility within the team (Cortellazzo et al., 2019). Thus, a behavioral adaption to virtual work circumstances is needed to prevent potential downsides.

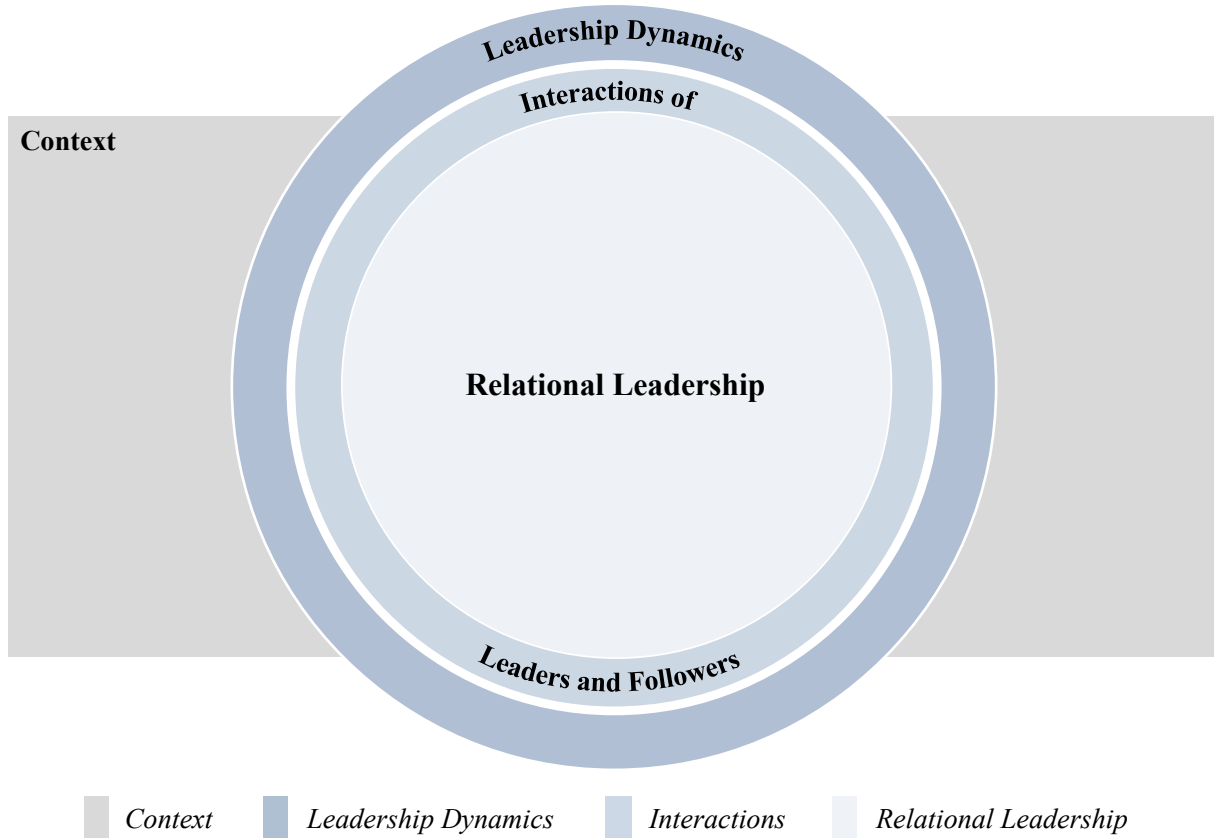
## 2.5 Research Gap

Leadership in PSFs remains an understudied topic with a distinct lack of holistic conceptualizations. While the current PSF literature and theoretical frameworks on leadership are relevant in explaining specific features or individual aspects, they lack a view of leadership that includes the perspectives of both, leaders and followers. The current literature has been unable to grasp the interactions of organizational members in PSFs, something that we argue to be central to understanding their leadership. Studies utilizing newer frameworks such as relational leadership are in general scarce (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011; Uhl-Bien, 2006), and even less so focusing on PSFs.

The interactions are bound by the context in which they happen, and the virtual work environment caused by the COVID-19 pandemic in great parts of 2020 and 2021 presented a major, unprecedented contextual change. While virtual work has been studied extensively in other types of companies, the focus has mostly been one-sided on either leaders or followers, but seldom on the interactions between them. Thus, research on relational leadership in PSFs in the context of virtual work is rather non-existent. However, given the increasing importance of interpersonal interactions in expert work and the likely upsurge of virtual work, such research is valuable to a great extent in the future, for leadership researchers and practitioners in PSFs and other virtual work organizations.

## 2.6 Theoretical Framework

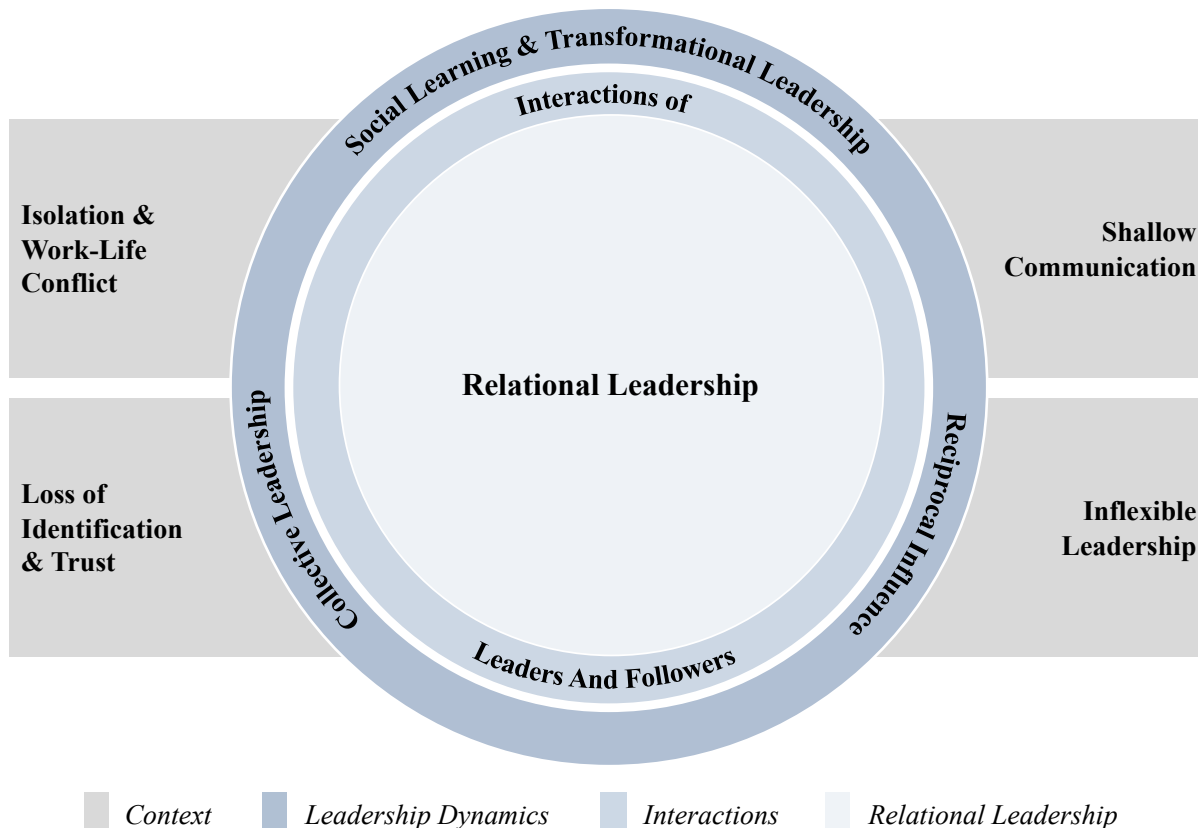
Relational leadership is grounded in the idea that we should focus directly on the relationships in an organization, rather than the individuals, in order to understand leadership. These relationships are shaped by the interactions between leaders and followers, and in our literature-based understanding, the interactions in turn are shaped by different leadership dynamics. Furthermore, interactions and leadership dynamics depend on the context in which the relationships take place. Our conceptualization of relational leadership is visualized in figure 1.



*Figure 1: Theoretical Framework I*

As discussed above, research on relational leadership in PSFs is scarce. So far, neither the interactions nor the relationship between leaders and followers have received much attention in previous studies. However, leadership in PSFs has been studied from the perspective of leaders and followers separately, providing an understanding of the underlying leadership dynamics: (1) collective leadership, (2) social learning and transformational leadership, and (3) reciprocal influence. Based on virtual work research in PSFs and other organizations, we have identified four challenges that the context of virtual work poses for leadership: (1) isolation & work-life conflict, (2) loss of identification and trust, (3) shallow communication, and (4) inflexible leadership. These challenges give us an idea on how the virtual work context caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has possibly affected interactions and relations between leaders and followers. Leadership dynamics and virtual work challenges thus supplement our framework in figure 2.





*Figure 2: Theoretical Framework II – Theoretical Findings*

While previous research is helpful in understanding the leadership dynamics in PSFs, the relational leadership at the core is still rather unexplored. Moreover, the radical change in context that occurred in 2020 and 2021 may have further obscured the already thin understanding we had. In this thesis, we aim to shed light on the relationships that construct the leadership in our case company and uncover the effects of virtual work on those relationships.

### 3 Methodology and Methods

This section presents our methodology and the research methods used. To understand relational leadership in virtual work and to answer the research question restated below, a series of semi-structured interviews were conducted within a selected case company. We first discuss the scientific approach, then present the case company, and finally describe how the data was collected and analyzed. The research question for this study is formulated as follows:

*How are the leader-follower relationships and interactions in professional service firms affected by virtual work, and how can relational leadership be conceptualized?*

#### 3.1 Research Approach

This thesis is based on a constructionist ontological position, as we conceptualize the world and all social phenomena to be created by social actors rather than being something that exists as an objective reality (Bryman & Bell, 2015; Fairhurst & Grant, 2010). In our view, leadership can best be understood as a relational process that happens between individuals in organizations rather than something that pre-exists within certain individuals or is linked to a given hierarchical status. Furthermore, we assume that these relational processes are continuously ongoing between individuals, instead of being one shared socially constructed reality. Thus, we do not just oppose a realist ontology, but adopt a relational ontological stance within social constructionism (Cunliffe, 2008; Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011; Uhl-Bien, 2006): Nature of reality is presumed intersubjective, not individual (Cunliffe, 2008; Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011).

An interpretivist epistemological position follows naturally from our ontological position (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Assuming the world to be constructed by social actors, knowledge needs to be derived from studying these actors and cannot be found by methods of natural science (ibid.). Given our intersubjective presumptions, we see knowledge situated at the micro-level; the focus of research needs to be on individual interactions rather than on the social constructions of organizations (Cunliffe, 2008). The intersubjective reality cannot be observed from the outside but needs to be studied from the interactions of those who are a part of its creation (Cunliffe, 2008; Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011).

#### 3.2 Research Method

The underlying research philosophy and the subsequent methodology naturally guide the methods used for collecting the data, and thus, the interpretivist and constructionist foundations call for qualitative research methods (Bryman & Bell, 2015; Slevitch, 2011) that allow to study socially constructed phenomena in-depth (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009; Flick, 2018).

As a combination of deductive and inductive research approaches, the abductive approach describes a “continuous movement between an empirical world and a model world” in which the theoretical baseline is continuously reoriented and refined based on empirical findings (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009; Dubois & Gadde, 2002: 554). The preliminary theoretical framework

constantly evolves and guides the researchers in the data collection and analysis process. Thereby, unanticipated results as well as emerging theoretical insights can be further explored in the process of systematic combining (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). As an abductive approach is considered appropriate to study context-specific explanations as well as develop and refine existing theories (Dubois & Gadde, 2002; Flick, 2011), we deem it suitable for this study.

Following an abductive approach, we consider the study of a case company appropriate as it allows us to generate empirical insights on the phenomena and context, while constantly readjusting the theoretical foundation (figure 4) (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009; Dubois & Gadde, 2002). To develop a deep understanding of the research object within the given time frame, a single case company with multiple, embedded units of analysis was chosen as research design, since it allows to grasp the complex, multi-faceted, and contemporary nature of relationships in its real-life context (Bryman & Bell, 2015; Dubois & Gadde, 2002; Flyvbjerg, 2006; Yin, 2014). The focus on a single case study allows us to establish a level of confidence between researchers and participants, limit external influences associated with a multiple-case study design, and gain insights into the different perspectives through embedding a great variety of participants in the analysis via an embedded rather than holistic design (Yin, 2014). Thereby, the choice of the particular case company is motivated by the greatest learning opportunity, in this case the identification of deeper causes behind the observed relationships and leadership in virtual work in PSFs (Bryman & Bell, 2015; Flyvbjerg, 2006).

Qualitative interviewing was chosen as the main method of data collection. While qualitative research includes also other possible methods (Bryman & Bell, 2015), we found that interviews were necessary to fully capture the nuanced phenomenon of leadership, and especially the relationships between leaders and followers. With the novel context of virtual work and limited access to documents, archival records, and direct observations, there were limited opportunities for combining several data collection methods. Thus, we focused on interviews as the single source and included internal specialists to put reports from employees into perspective (Yin, 2014) (see 3.4.1).

### 3.3 Research Case Company

As case company, we chose a global leadership advisory firm that fulfilled the criteria by Empson (2017) and Hinings et al. (2015) of PSFs: (1) the company applies specialist technical knowledge to offer customized solutions, while (2) their experts and the accumulated knowledge within the firm act as the main resource. These experts (3) organize themselves autonomously in an elective partnership model and (4) recognize themselves as experts, as do clients and competitors. Furthermore, all offices within the European region have operated in virtual work mode for more than a year since March 2020. Therefore, virtual work as defined by Golden & Fromen (2011) has been prevalent at the time of interviews; thus, the conditions to study relationships in virtual work context were given. Due to competitive confidentiality reasons, the company will remain anonymous.

The case company is led by a global team of partners that together own the firm, manage client relationships, and execute client projects. They are supported by consultants who take over individual tasks in client projects like background analyses and span from graduate level to

professionals awaiting their promotion to partner. The assistants act as project managers for client projects and cover further administrative tasks. Thus, partners, consultants, and assistants together form teams that deliver client projects. This client-facing part of the business is supported by business functions like accounting, human resources, client development, and real estate. The company was chosen among others as it not only fulfilled the criteria of PSFs and virtual work but also showed commitment to provide access to interviewees among all seniorities from different offices, which allowed us to reduce bias that could come from a narrow geographic limitation.

## 3.4 Data Collection

In abductive research, data collection is not only guided by the initial theoretical framework, but also contributes to its continuous revision and refinement through systematic combining and is thus shaped by empirical and theoretical findings along the way (Dubois & Gadde, 2002).

### 3.4.1 Participant Sampling

The main sample requirement of this study was to include people from different seniority levels to cover various perspectives across various offices. While there was a certain degree of what Bryman & Bell (2015: 489) call ‘convenience’ or ‘opportunistic’ sampling as the interviewees could not freely be selected by the researchers, the company aimed to provide interviewees that could best contribute to the research. With the appearance of new insights and potential topics of interests, more specific interviewees were requested, for example a consultant who joined just weeks before virtual work started. This is in line with the abductive approach, where participant sampling is a part of the continuous process of refining theory based on emerging empirical insights (Dubois & Gadde, 2002).

Besides partners, consultants, and assistants, also specialists from client development, human resources and real estate were interviewed. Due to their expert knowledge in our field of interest, they can be considered elite interviewees who can contribute to seeing the whole picture (Gillham, 2005). To optimally utilize their perspective, these interviews were conducted in the middle of the data collection process to prepare the right questions beforehand and use their insights in later interviews.

While some researchers advocate for sample sizes of 12 interviewees or more to reach saturation for homogeneous groups (Guest et al., 2006), Crouch & McKenzie (2006: 493) call for a different understanding of sample sizes: In constructionist research, every individual respondent represents a variation “of a particular social setting and of the experiences arising in it”. Thus, instead of understanding the interviewees as a representative sample of a certain population, they should be understood as individual cases in which every single case represents “an instance of social reality” that can create new insights (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006: 493). As the constructionist nature of our research does not aim for wider generalization of findings, we follow Crouch & McKenzie’s (2006) reasoning in seeing every interviewee as an individual case. Therefore, our aim was to interview people from different seniority levels with various backgrounds and tenures at the case company to allow for a great variety of relationship constructions to unfold. Figure 3 gives an overview of our 21 interviewees.

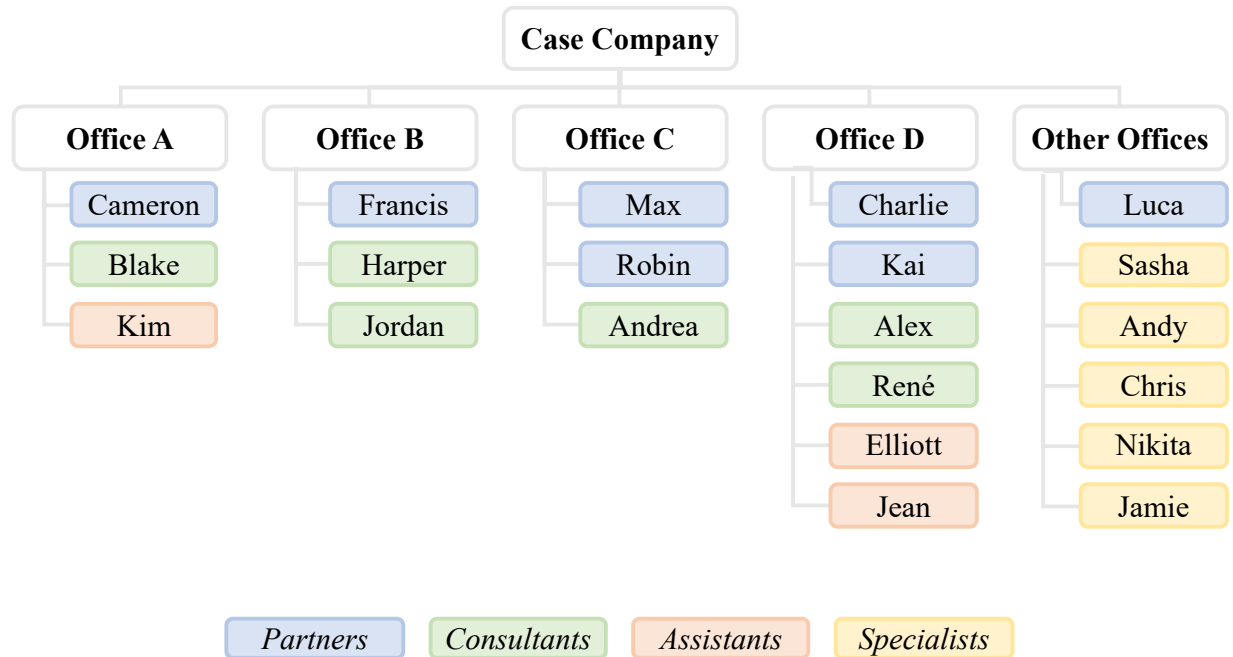


Figure 3: Overview of Interviewees

### 3.4.2 Semi-Structured Interviews

The interviews conducted were semi-structured, thus following an interview guide, while still allowing the interviewers to ask follow-up or clarification questions on the topics raised by the interviewee (Bryman & Bell, 2015; Saunders et al., 2007). While this method is suitable for sensitive and complex topics, it is also the preferred approach in qualitative studies (Saunders et al., 2007). Further, it supports the abductive approach allowing new concepts to arise, thus contributing to the understanding of the empirical phenomenon (Gillham, 2005).

### 3.4.3 Interview Guide

Based on leadership dynamics and virtual work challenges, we formulated open questions to let the interviewee freely choose which aspects to emphasize (Saunders et al., 2007). We prepared a longer list of sub-questions to react to the interviewee's first answers, and arranged the order of questions based on the flow of ideas, deviating from the interview guide if necessary, to allow for deeper and varied insights. Our intention was to not only cover all previously identified topics, but to create room for the interviewee's perception and feelings through probing and specifying questions about individual experiences and emotions. However, we made sure that the width of questions was addressed in all interviews and that similar wordings were used in every interview (Bryman & Bell, 2015). To increase data quality, we made sure to clarify our understanding of interviewees' answers through critical inquiries whenever needed (Flick, 2018). Further, we only briefly introduced the topic to the participants prior to the interview to allow for spontaneous reactions to the individual questions (ibid.).

Following the understanding that someone can act as both, leader and follower, depending on the situation, we created one interview guide (see appendix 9.1) that was used as a basis for every

interview. The interview guide was constantly updated and revised as the theoretical framework developed based on emerging insights. This interview guide was further used as a basis to create individual interview guides for the specialists.

#### 3.4.4 Interview Setting

The interviews were conducted virtually by using the video conferencing software Microsoft Teams and were held in English. As this setting closely resembles the current work life conditions at the case company, we deemed it appropriate for our interviews (Gillham, 2005). Both interviewers were present and alternated the role of ‘lead interviewer’, while the other one was taking notes and identified potential poking questions. This allowed us to exchange feedback on interviewing techniques and provided backup, as the ‘passive interviewer’ could take over in case of technical issues or when a change of direction was needed (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Every interview was recorded using the built-in function of Microsoft Teams. After finishing each interview, we transcribed it as accurately as possible within three days, which allowed for quick reviewing and holistic preserving of the insights (Bazeley, 2013; Gillham, 2005).

#### 3.4.5 Pilot Phase

The data collection started with a pilot phase, where we interviewed one partner, consultant, and assistant to test and improve the interview guide, as well as the interview, transcription, and analysis processes (Flick, 2018; Gillham, 2005). As a result, we rephrased selected questions to facilitate understanding and improve data quality. When recognizing differences in the description of the same events across interviewees, we specifically requested access to all three levels at various offices. Further, the pilot interviews reassured that an allotted time of 60 minutes was suitable to cover all relevant topics while giving the interviewees room for their own thoughts without compromising concentration and focus. Due to the great depth of insights, we decided to include the pilot interviews in our data analysis.

#### 3.4.6 Data Collection Phase

In the data collection phase, we conducted 18 interviews of 45-65 minutes with employees across different offices and seniority levels as well as specialists within four weeks. We used the updated interview guide from the pilot phase and continuously reviewed the findings after each transcription to add follow-up questions, address emerging issues, and further develop the theoretical framework.

#### 3.4.7 Follow-Up Phase

Based on the empirical findings from the pilot and data collection phase and the revised theoretical framework, three follow-up interviews were conducted with selected previous interviewees to fine tune and contextualize the findings as well as to prevent drawing wrong conclusions (Flick, 2018). We focused on getting another perspective on topics that so far yielded rather one-sided learnings<sup>1</sup>.

---

<sup>1</sup> Due to confidentiality reasons, we do not disclose the interviewees that took part in follow-up interviews.

## 3.5 Data Analysis

Following an abductive approach, the data analysis was a continuous process that allowed us to constantly review and refine the initial theoretical framework (Dubois & Gadde, 2002).

### 3.5.1 Data Analysis Method

To remain true to the abductive approach, we chose thematic analysis to inductively categorize empirical data into codes and identify superordinate themes while constantly going back and forth between data, codes and analysis (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006). Even though there is no clear academic agreement about the application and sovereignty of thematic analysis, Braun & Clarke (2006) advocate to understand it as a foundational method for qualitative analysis due to its ability to analyze and report detailed and complex data patterns. In line with our constructionist ontology, thematic analysis can be used to carve out the constructionist comprehension of relational leadership by progressing from organized description to pattern interpretation and is thus deemed suitable for our analysis (*ibid.*).

### 3.5.2 Data Analysis Process

Our data analysis process was built upon an inductive coding of the data, followed by an identification and matching of code-patterns into themes (tensions) which were subsequently clustered (interactions) and then interpreted by theory (see appendix 9.2 for an overview of codes, code-patterns, tensions, and interactions).

As a first step, we reviewed the transcripts to identify and label reoccurring codes inductively. Here, we paid close attention to code the interviewee's construction of their experience based on their words and further did this individually with subsequent comparison and discussion of codes to prevent any early interpretations that could bias the results (Bazeley, 2013; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Flick, 2018). While we started with basic keywords to generate a great number of different codes, we ensured to merge codes that described the same phenomenon in the common comparison (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Along this process, we used the software NVivo to assist the manual tasks and allow for seamless recoding to prevent any data losses (Bryman & Bell, 2015; Yin, 2014). Further, we collected plausible rival explanations that emerged during the interviews or literature review and could explain findings beyond the virtual work context (Yin, 2014).

Secondly, we compared codes depicting individual descriptions of the same situations and grouped different code patterns (Bazeley, 2013; Yin, 2014). Through contrasting these patterns, we derived themes that visualize the different constructions of relational leadership in the company; thus, they were called tensions. Further, this pattern matching allowed us to identify leaders and followers in each tension.

Thirdly, we organized these tensions into three clusters, representing different interaction types we identified during our thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998): (1) project interactions, (2) development interactions, and (3) socialization interactions.

Finally, we related our findings to the theoretical model, thereby seeking explanations for our findings (chapter 5) and used our insights to complement the theoretical framework in which our findings are anchored (chapter 6) (Bazeley, 2013; Braun & Clarke, 2006).

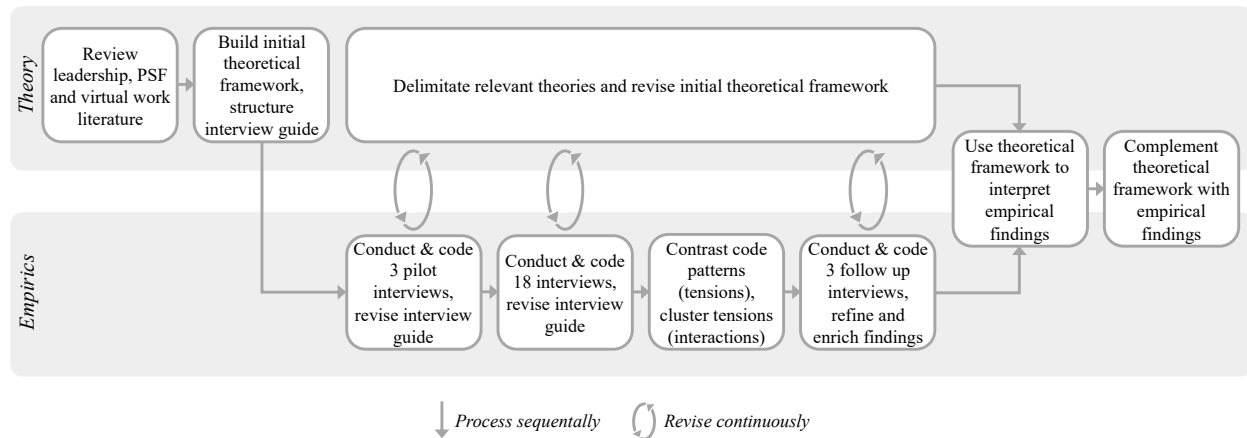


Figure 4: Abductive Approach

## 3.6 Quality Considerations

The quality considerations most often used for quantitative research cannot be as easily applied for this qualitative thesis. As our research philosophy is far from realist, rather assuming a world constantly shaped by social actors, the results of this study cannot be judged in relation to an objective ‘truth’ (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Therefore, the quality criteria need to be adapted to our research.

### 3.6.1 Reliability

Reliability is about the consistency of the results, whether or not the study can be replicated (Bryman & Bell, 2015; Yin, 2014). As we have discussed, our study provides a snapshot of socially constructed realities within an organization, firmly anchored by context and time. Thus, the external reliability is rather hard to achieve, as the experiences of respondents and the situations in which they happen constantly change (Bryman & Bell, 2015). However, we took measures to foster internal reliability. Both of us started the coding process independently and coded the pilot interviews. This allowed us to see any discrepancies in the codes and account for those before moving on to the rest of the interviews, which we coded separately and then reviewed together as well (Bazeley, 2013; Boyatzis, 1998; Bryman & Bell, 2015). Furthermore, we tried our best to separate any personal biases and existing theoretical knowledge from the coding, keeping it as close to the empirics as possible (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Yin, 2014). The codes, themes, and the overall storylines were aside from minor differences similar between the two of us, advocating the reliability of this study (Boyatzis, 1998).

### 3.6.2 Validity

Validity is about the link between the measures used and the results achieved (Bryman & Bell, 2015; Yin, 2014). The interview guide consisted of many open-ended questions that allowed the



interviewees to freely express their ideas related to relationships, leadership, and virtual work. This was done to ensure that to the greatest extent possible, the questions would not steer the interviewee or introduce any theoretical bias (ibid.). Even though internal validity is less important for exploratory studies, our constant awareness for potential rival explanations that could influence the relational leadership beyond the identified leadership dynamics and virtual work context contribute to internal validity (Yin, 2014). Furthermore, respondent validation received from both, the follow-up interviews and the representatives of the case company itself (see appendix 9.3), strengthen the credibility of the results: the components of the resulting framework were recognized by the participants (Bryman & Bell, 2015; Yin, 2014).

### 3.6.3 Transferability

Transferability or external validity refers to the degree to which the results can be generalized to other cases (Bryman & Bell, 2015; Yin, 2014). While a quantitative study would allow a greater transferability of results, a qualitative study was necessary given our topic and research philosophy (Bryman & Bell, 2015; Flick, 2018; Yin, 2014). Hence, we do not seek to provide results that could directly be applied in another context, but rather to present conceptualizations that can serve a basis for analyzing other cases. Nevertheless, the broad presentation of the empirics and meticulous connections made to theory may help future researchers in adopting the connections made in this study (Bryman & Bell, 2015).

## 3.7 Ethical Considerations

After discussing the confidentiality and GDPR compliance (Regulation, 2016/679) with the case company and addressing any open questions, our interviewees gave informed consent to participate in the interview(s) and being recorded (Gillham, 2005). To create an open, sympathetic atmosphere without exploiting the interviewee's vulnerability, we sought to be friendly while maintaining a certain distance to prevent any inappropriate disclosures through openly identifying the purpose of the research and expectations of the interview (ibid.). Further, we made sure not to address gender, racial or social class issues and to completely protect their confidentiality (ibid.) through randomized pseudonyms using gender neutral names to prevent direct inferences. In cases where interviewees shared potentially confidential information, we excluded these quotes from the analysis. All audio files, transcripts and other analysis related documents were stored and secured on SSE's cloud storage and deleted after the thesis was completed.

## 4 Empirical Result

From the thematic analysis of 24 interviews (including 3 pilot and 3 follow-up interviews), three different types of interactions between leaders and followers have been identified: (1) project interactions, (2) development interactions, and (3) socialization interactions. As all three can happen between the same leader and follower and might impact one another, they cannot be clearly separated from each other. However, all three interactions usually involve different constellations of people, are driven by different motives and have been impacted in different ways by virtual work; thus, we use them to structure the presentation of empirical findings.

Following the constructionist view of relationships, every interviewee's understanding of the situation has to be seen as such. By contrasting these views and finding matching patterns, we have identified tensions that characterize each interaction type and have been attributed to the virtual work; thus, selected quotes will be used to exemplify the virtual relationships in the case company (see appendix 9.2 for an overview of interviewee reports and 9.4 for more quotes). To facilitate interviewee differentiation, their pseudonyms are complemented by P for partner, C for consultant, A for assistant, and S for specialist.

### 4.1 Project Interactions

Delivering high quality results on time to maintain valuable client relationships is of utmost importance, and the resulting work environment has been characterized by high pressure and long work hours. After one year of virtual work, the relationships between partners, consultants, and assistants have been to some degree affected by the initial crisis mode caused by the unprecedented pandemic, as well as the increased number of projects that were won once the economic outlook stabilized. However, in this section we focus on the effect of virtual work and the two tensions that have a profound effect on project interactions.

#### 4.1.1 Stressing Demands vs. Personal Commitment

As partners are ultimately responsible for presenting results to the clients, high demands, a strong focus, and dedication on delivering results have always been part of the work environment. Since the start of the virtual work period, the demands however seem to have increased to even higher levels. An increased number of projects and resulting virtual communication require more time from consultants and assistants.

*“Well, it has always been like that, but not as intense as right now (...), the pressure is increasing since COVID. And since the remote work, because it's just requiring more communication, more video conferences and so on. So it was a lot before COVID. But it's even more since COVID, or the current environment.” (Blake/C)*

##### 4.1.1.1 Partners Expect Full Commitment of Followers

To constantly deliver on time and in high quality, partners hold strong expectations towards their followers' commitment and dedication.

*“But if someone gets stressed of my demands, (...) and I email late in the evening, and I text something at odd hours, if they get stressed, then that is obviously a problem.” (Kai/P)*

While these expectations have always been high, they have increased even further with virtual work.

*“But I think in the past year, (...) the urgency increased (...). We are even more, let's say worried about being able to pursue new assignments or win new work. (...) Deadlines become shorter, or expectations become higher about, you know, this must be excellent work that we have to deliver to the client.” (Sasha/S)*

#### *4.1.1.2 Consultants are Committed to Perform According to the Partners' Demands*

The consultants are accustomed to these demands and feel committed to the deadlines set by the partners. If something needs to be done, it is done without questioning and at the expense of free or personal time. This is considered to be necessary to succeed in the company in the long term, and thus described as personal choice by many consultants.

[When asked to describe an ideal employee]

*“Well, someone who goes the extra mile and doesn't shy away from taking extra work? Because you could always say you have enough to do and it's just too much, the workload is too intense. But someone who's super engaged will always try to make everything possible that is required.” (Blake/C)*

Even though consultants justify their intense work hours with personal commitment, they admit that it is not solely driven by intrinsic motivation but demanded by their superiors and role-modeled by successful peers or leaders.

*“Of course, it's demanded in a way because I have to deliver, I have deadlines, which I have to meet. (...) But it's also personal commitment. I'm not a person who just says okay, it's 6pm in the evening, I'll stop here. And then I don't care what happens. Because I don't think you can have this mentality when you're working in consulting.” (Blake/C)*

#### *4.1.1.3 Uncoordinated Demands from Multiple Partners Piling Up*

While some consultants work with only one partner, most support several partners and thus multiple client projects simultaneously. As a result, multiple deadlines and deliverables add up and must be managed by the consultant. This situation has been aggravated in virtual work as the individual workload and the coordination among partners have become more difficult, which was reported by partners, consultants, and specialists.

*“For each partner, their project will be the most important one. So you have to find a good way to prioritize yourself because if you're talking to the partner, he will always tell you that his project has priority. (...) They don't really care about how long it takes, or how much work you have to do during the week on other assignments, as long as the results for their assignments are delivered.” (Blake/C)*

#### 4.1.1.4 Internal Meetings Aggravate Focus on Client Projects

The great number of meetings required to replace physical informal interactions, organize client projects, and build relationships (4.3) make up a great part of the regular working hours and take away focus from project execution. As a result, the working hours of consultants and assistants increase further.

*“The working hours have become longer. So, I usually start earlier in the morning, and [finish] later in the evening. You spend a lot of time on internal stuff, internal conferences, and less on external work (...). Well, right now it's the nightmare. It really is. So last week was terrible. I started working at seven in the morning and well, ended at 10pm in the evening, and only had a short lunch break in between. So, it was really terrible because it was just so much work. So many things just coming together on various projects was tough.”* (Blake/C)

#### 4.1.1.5 Flexibility of Work Equals Longer Days

Because the consultants are used to high workloads and consider them necessary to advance in the company, the commitment level has not decreased during the period of virtual work. The flexibility of work in terms of time and place has mainly translated into longer days and quick work sessions all throughout the day.

*“I spend a lot of time at work. (...) You add those extra sort of hours, minutes, because, you know, eat dinner, and then you know, the computer's just sitting there because, you know, you're gonna open it the next day, I'm at least bad at putting it away. So, I go back, and I sit there for 30 minutes and do something again (...). If you add all those 30 minutes up during the night, evenings (...), the hours add up a little bit more. If it was 50, 55 before (...), now it's more 55, 60. You know, but yeah, that's up to a lot during the five-day workweek.”* (Alex/C)

### 4.1.2 Efficiency Fallacy vs. Workload Awareness

Overall, the productivity in terms of output has reportedly increased during the virtual work period. While partners have previously conducted client meetings partially virtually, it has been exclusively virtual for about a year. This has positively impacted the partners' productivity and efficiency, as they are travelling less and their clients have become more flexibly available, which has freed up a lot of time for research, planning, and meetings. While this might have impacted the partners' understanding of productivity and efficiency, it is not in line with the perception of consultants and assistants.

#### 4.1.2.1 Reduction of Traveling has Lightened up Partners' Schedules

As client interactions have become virtual, the partners' schedules have been freed from time-intensive traveling. As a result, some partners have more time to spend with their families, while partners and specialists from other offices experience increased demands and report an increased workload.

*“I actually work less (...). So I would say I probably worked 65 or 70 hours a week. (...) I probably work maybe 50 hours a week now.”* (Max/P)

*“I mean, I’m doing double the hours probably that I was doing, because I was travelling for some part of that.” (Andy/S)*

Further, the majority of partners report increased productivity among their teams in delivering on client projects.

*“Efficiency has gone up, you know, we are so productive, productivity in a kind of a classical economic sense is increasing, because we are you know, sharper in communication, we are more to the point.” (Kai/P)*

#### *4.1.2.2 Consultants have Cut Back on their Work-Life Balance*

For consultants, however, the increased number of projects and respective need for research, planning, and organizing have meant hours of additional work (4.1.1.2).

*“I work much more than I used to work. (...) Before, you used to have these free times, and the socializing (...). Now, (...), I see my calendar, and it’s back-to-back meetings. (...) So, I would say we work much more now.” (René/C)*

#### *4.1.2.3 Assistants use Former Commuting Times to Compensate for Higher Workload*

All interviewed assistants described how they currently use the time they previously commuted to the office to cover the increased demands and that this development was highly appreciated as it does not add to their total work hours.

*“Thanks to home office, yeah, if you have three hours a day just on the train or in the car, and you have this time back, you can work if you want to (...). So I’m absolutely relaxed with that.” (Kim/A)*

#### *4.1.2.4 Partners Tolerate Increased Workload and Hours of Followers*

This has created an efficiency fallacy, as some partners believe that the company has become more efficient, achieving more in a shorter time. The partners are less aware of the actual number of hours spent working by consultants and assistants, as their main focus is on outputs.

[When asked whether consultants work more in virtual work]

*“That (...) is the difficult one for me to judge because I don’t know what more means anymore. In terms of hours, I don’t necessarily think so. (...) I also think that there’s a lot of efficiency gain to work on your own (...), you’re always distracted in the office. And so, I wonder if in actual hours, it’s feels roughly the same, but in actual output in may even have increased?” (Max/P)*

Because of the nature and organization of their work, some partners do not feel responsible to find out in detail how much their followers work, or they attribute late work hours to the flexibility during the day.

*“If you get your work done, people don’t care where you are, or what you’re doing, just get the work done. It’s very outcome focused.” (Jordan/C)*

*“For the consultants, the research can be done at any time. So, I did notice that a lot of the consultants are online late at night, they work at 10 o’clock. Many of the ones that have kids kind of take breaks in between and then catch up later on in the evening. I don’t have to know what they do. So, I don’t actually care. Because I mean, I don’t need to control someone’s work. That’s why I’m in professional services, I don’t want to.” (Cameron/P)*

At the same time, the visibility and transparency of work hours is reduced as colleagues no longer sit in the same office. Consequently, leaders only notice if their immediate followers work late when they are online at the same time.

*“I think one challenge we have is, (...) since we don't see people every day and specifically the people that are working with you on [a project], you don't know their work level, (...) you don't always know what they do for the others (...). While in the office you see that much earlier, much better and it is much more apparent. In this case you don't see it and that is a bit more problematic.” (Robin/P)*

#### 4.1.2.5 Continuous Efforts to Keep Work Life Boundaries up

As most interviewees agree, work-life balance has not been a top priority previously, but it has become an even greater challenge in virtual work.

*“So, it's kind of a 24/7 job anyhow, but it has been exaggerated during this year that it is pretty virtual.” (Kai/P)*

Partners and assistants seem to be strict and rather successful in maintaining boundaries between work and private life.

*“There's no distinction anymore between the work life and the private life, which, even in normal times, is not good in our job, but it's gotten worse in the sense that sometimes colleagues call me at 10 at night and want to discuss something or these kinds of things. Which I ignore. (...) I try to really keep things separate. And as I say, I don't do calls late at night or early in the morning, unless it's necessary.” (Cameron/P)*

*“And I'm actually very diligent about when I'm done, I actually shut down my computer, so that I'm not tempted to run and check my email or whatever it might be. So, I actually shut down my computer and put my phone on 'Do Not Disturb'.” (Elliott/A)*

However, consultants seem to be more devoted to being available outside work hours, as they feel pressured to respond to messages and requests from their partners as they are role-modeling this behavior.

*“It's somehow an example that most people (...) work a lot from our office. Especially the partners, they are, you know, working all the time, Saturday morning, Saturday afternoon, Sunday.” (Andrea/C)*

## 4.2 Development Interactions

To constantly deliver on client projects, developing employees to perform well, deliver on their tasks, and achieve client satisfaction is very important. Thus, enabling and promoting followers to develop along their role is seen as a great leadership quality and highly appreciated among followers. However, interviews have shown differences among partners: some understand themselves as coaches, while others show less interest in developing their followers.

*“They actually, some of them left industry, because they were fed up with developing people. (...) We have a lot of people working in a dedicated team, one partner, one consultant, one assistant. And if you promote your consultant, you’re doomed. Because he or she is gone, then. And you have to work with someone new. So, you have to start all over again, which is a huge amount of work.”* (Cameron/P)

As *“clients always come first”* (Blake/C), the development aspect of the leader-follower relationship to some degree depends on the client situation. While the pandemic crisis has created changes in firm structure and client situation that might have impacted the development relationships at the case company, this chapter seeks to single out the effects of virtual work.

### 4.2.1 Vanishing in the Background vs. Proactive Exposure

To a great extent, the learning of followers is based on observing others and the examples and role-modeling leaders set. Interviews have shown that virtual work reduces the number of learning touchpoints while making it easier to recede into the background, thus requiring an extra effort from both, leaders and followers, to keep the learning relationship upright.

#### 4.2.1.1 Aggravated Access to Client Calls

Attending client calls has been a common method to foster learning among consultants. However, as these interactions have almost exclusively been moved from telephone to video calls, the accessibility to attend and observe these calls has been reduced. Further, consultants have become less visible for partners and thus become less involved in spontaneous learning opportunities.

*“If a partner is talking to their client (...) they would say, (...) ‘[consultant], just come in and listen, just come in and observe’. They can’t do that anymore, right? Because one, they don’t know if [consultant] is available. Two, it’d be weird if [consultant] pops on to the videoconference without actually, you know, being part of the team.”* (Jamie/S)

Some partners have turned the video communication with their clients into a dedicated learning opportunity for their followers and asked for permission to invite juniors to attend the call. This is especially the case if client interactions have moved from face-to-face to virtual communication. However, this requires a particularly trustful client relationship, organization of every participant’s role, and particular engagement from the partner.

*“Now we sometimes have seven or eight people on the phone, and the client (...). Also, we have young consultants that can speak up and we say ‘Hey, you speak about this [project task]’. And they can do it, which in the past, they would not have had the opportunity.”* (Luca/P)

Especially new joiners who reportedly struggled with building trustful relationships in virtual work are described to have difficulties getting access to observing and testing client interactions to learn and develop into their new role (see 4.3.2.4). Thus, partners are required “*to invest in that trust before [they] meet the person*” (Kai/P).

#### 4.2.1.2 *Increased Efforts of Reaching Out for Advice and Problem Solving*

Besides dedicated observation of client interactions, learning experiences also stem from the exposure to everyday situations in the office and the observation of informal talks, processes, and interactions with peers or leaders. However, as most touchpoints now must be planned and observations on the go have been limited to the project team, this learning experience has vanished, as almost all interviewees reported. Especially for new joiners, the lack of these observations on the go aggravates their process of growing into their new role.

*“In a world where consultants would be sitting side by side, or assistants would be sitting side by side, they’re learning, particularly if you’re new, from somebody else, because it’s not in a formal way. They’re watching, they’re hearing you on the phone, or in a moment when they’re struggling and they don’t know what to do, they ask the person right next to them ‘Hey, do you know how I look this up?’ So, the organizational learning, those things that we take for granted, are gone.”* (Andy/S)

With a reduction in touchpoints, the individual employee has become less visible in virtual work. Thus, followers have seen a decrease in leaders offering advice as they no longer see whether their followers are struggling.

*“I think there’s a sense where the caring is lessened because you just can’t care when you can’t see.”* (Jamie/S)

As a result, employees on all positions have increased their efforts to actively reach out to others for help. However, this is mostly limited to existing relationships as new joiners seem to be more reluctant to actively reach out. Even though caring and helping others is a great part of the organizational cultural, the increasing number of requests for support clashes with packed calendars: torn between dutiful accessibility and demanding back-to-back meetings, most leaders struggle to keep up with the demand.

*“People are very quick to jump on a call or you know, help out in any sense. I think that has been even more embraced (...) in the virtual world. (...) I think the only negative part (...) is that probably more people do it. And, you know, before it was people had more time and now, they get more requests for those sorts of helps. You know, they don’t have as much time.”* (Alex/C)

Partners describe that in some cases, this even results in problems remaining unaddressed for longer times as calendars are booked, and junior employees not developing as usual.

*“When you have a problem, you cannot share it immediately normally with a colleague or someone else, because your calendar is more booked. And so is your colleagues’ calendar.”*



*So, when can you have the spontaneous discussions? That means that you carry problems, longer times, normally.” (Charlie/P)*

#### *4.2.1.3 Less Barriers for Short Inquiries*

However, this is not the case for everyone as some interviewees across all positions have described how the barriers for reaching out to their leader for advice have been reduced due to the short distances in virtual communication and easiness of quick requests.

*“Actually, with [my partner], it has tended to be even more collaborative (...). In the office he used to be really busy all the time and I didn’t want to approach him in the office maybe when he was working, but now it’s really easy to just send a short message via Teams. And he’s really quick to answer any question I have.” (Jean/A)*

Sometimes though, the physical distance outweighs advantages of virtual communication and inhibits short inquiries, having a detrimental effect on learning on the go.

*“Newcomers, they learn really on the job a lot, and the big advantage of being physically in person, and being able to ask 50 questions a day, (...) ‘I don’t remember how to do this, or where can I find this?’, you can’t always make a zoom call to, you know, to ask these questions.” (Jordan/C)*

#### *4.2.1.4 Need to Make Actions Visible*

Due to the reduced number of touchpoints between leaders and followers, followers feel the need to proactively raise attention to their actions and results.

*“We have partners in the office who are just not very good at communicating, and you have to be more visible to them to make communication possible. And when, of course, working remotely, (...) you’re less visible for them. So, you have to be more proactive and push them a bit more than you would need to do in the office.” (Blake/C)*

In selected cases, interviewees even reported more opportunities for visibility through a greater number of official meetings with senior employees in which followers get the chance to shine more often than before.

*“I think it’s given more opportunities to show off the work that’s been done. So, an example is we have a weekly town hall meeting. (...) So suddenly, you’ve gone from the timeframe of being able to shout about some achievements every three months, suddenly, it’s every week.” (Jordan/C)*

While some leaders notice the increased communication efforts from their followers, they do not describe a reduction in their followers’ visibility; One partner even described a decrease in proactive attempts of reaching out to leaders.

*“I actually even see the inverse, where I find that amongst partners, we discuss why we frequently need to follow up with the consultants to ask where we’re at on something. Not necessarily because they haven’t been doing it, but because they haven’t been*

*communicating it (...). My feeling is that there is not a kind of proactiveness around showing off what they may have done.” (Max/P)*

#### 4.2.1.5 Convenience of Going on Mute

At the same time, several partners and consultants have described the convenience of simply going on mute, or not speaking up in meetings with many participants and hence contributing to their own in-visibility themselves.

*“I think I take less space, it’s easier to just, you know, go on mute. (...) People see less of me. I take more space in person.” (Alex/C)*

*“We do have bigger meetings, but in bigger meetings, interaction doesn’t really work well. People think about whether or not they really say something in the meeting, or whether they just listen. (...) And that takes away visibility for some other people that want to develop.” (Cameron/P)*

#### 4.2.2 Giving Feedback vs. Avoiding Conflict

While most interviewees report that the overall development plans remain unimpacted by virtual work, the informal feedback that allows to address arising development fields and has a direct impact on the working relationships has seen a change in virtual work. For all positions, having a mentor or someone invested in your professional development has been identified as crucial to succeed at the case company *“because it can be a pretty lonely job, you are a lot on yourself”* (Luca/P), especially in virtual work when appreciation is rare.

Interviews have pointed out a gap between partners that feel comfortable in giving both, positive and negative feedback, and partners that like to give positive feedback but refrain from giving negative feedback as they associate that with potential conflicts. The tendency to not address negative feedback to avoid conflict seems to be widely spread as it was described by almost all interviewees. Not addressing current issues has shown to impede collaboration and healthy work relationships as leaders rather stop working with certain followers than provide honest feedback. As a result, interviewees reported about former employees that left the firm after promotions had been passed over without being given any transparent feedback.

*“So, if the partner works with the consultant, and the consultant doesn’t deliver in the way that the partner likes it. Most of the time, we would just walk away from this person, and not give maybe a hard feedback, or potentially even fire this person. And we would just avoid working with this person. And that is relatively typical, which I think is not fair, because people need to know where they stand. And they also need to get feedback in order to improve because if they don’t even know what the problem is, they can’t improve.” (Cameron/P)*

Simultaneously, the importance of both, positive and negative feedback as a quality of great leadership is undisputed by almost all interviewees, even those partners who expressed difficulties addressing negative issues themselves.

#### 4.2.2.1 Choosing the Right Virtual Communication Mode

In virtual work, partners who feel comfortable addressing feedback still use moments of informal chats to address feedback directly to the followers they are working with. Thereby, they pay attention to prevent misunderstandings that could arise from sending written feedback and prefer (video) calling to convey their message and ensure correct understanding.

*“But (...) it’s better to just call and give feedback maybe than to write it in a short message because maybe when you can see the person, you can see how they react. And maybe you haven’t been clear about your message and maybe they will not handle it well. So, I think it’s better to give feedback when you can see each other.” (Jean/A)*

However, virtual communication might also facilitate the provision of feedback as some partners appreciate the physical distance.

*“Sometimes people find it easier, weirdly, to give feedback when you’re sort of sitting behind a computer screen rather than sitting face-to-face opposite someone. So, I think it’s helped to some degree.” (Harper/C)*

#### 4.2.2.2 Restricted Non-Verbal Feedback Hints

Besides the explicitly addressed feedback that was described previously, one partner described how the bandwidth of inexplicit feedback in form of subtle hints through body language and mimic has been reduced in virtual communication. This not only reduces the opportunity to give small signs during meetings but also impedes the opportunity for followers to request more explicit feedback afterwards.

*“What I feel in the virtual setting is that you miss a layer of interaction, that is body language, that is, you know, the non-spoken part of communication. (...) Because just to give you an example, in a meeting, where you’re in a room together, you say something and you note that the person next to you has a reaction to it without saying something. And then in some cases, you might probably ask the person, so what was that about? (...) But you don’t see this in a virtual setting.” (Cameron/P)*

#### 4.2.2.3 Avoiding Negative Feedback

However, partners who previously avoided negative feedback report that their avoidance of feedback and the accompanying conflict potential are even further amplified through virtual work, as they are afraid of potential repercussions and misunderstandings. Even partners who usually feel comfortable providing feedback feel uncomfortable giving negative feedback to employees they have not met in person.

*“Giving negative feedback virtually is not that easy. I try to avoid it. I’m not interested in any conflicts. (...) When you deliver negative feedback, you don’t really feel how they receive it virtually. And there are a few occasions where, where I really needed to give negative feedback. And when not being able to do that, I didn’t do it. You have to carry the burden until you forget it. Maybe it leads to the person not improving as much as you would like to.” (Charlie/P)*

#### 4.2.2.4 Requesting Direct Feedback

As a result of the unsteady feedback culture, some consultants have started proactively requesting feedback from their leaders or providing feedback to peers whenever suitable.

[When asked whether consultants get the feedback they need]

*“I do. Yeah, definitely. And if I don’t get it proactively, I will ask for it. Yeah.”* (Blake/C)

However, this is not the case in every office, hinting towards a differently advanced feedback culture and the potential barrier of approaching leaders with packed calendars.

[When asked whether feedback is being demanded more frequently]

*“No, not that much. Surprisingly little demand for feedback. But everyone assumes that everyone is busy, I think so. You know, feedback would take bilateral time outside what’s scheduled typically. And many of us have meetings back-to-back all the time. So, when would you have time to give feedback? It’s not evident.”* (Charlie/P)

#### 4.2.2.5 Losing Touchpoints for Occasional Mentoring

Two interviewees emphasized how bi-directional mentoring relationships, that often constitute of informal touchpoints, have not materialized in virtual work.

*“I know there’s colleagues who I go to for thoughts, reflections, but it’s more informal. (...) Maybe it has changed because when I run in or, or cycle in, one of my favorite people who’s quite a senior person in the firm, his office is just by the shower room. And so, when I’m going for a shower or coming out of the shower, we’d often have 10, 15 minutes talking.”* (Francis/P)

### 4.3 Socialization Interactions

While there are slight differences among the various offices and European regions, the overall culture was described as caring and results-oriented with a great emphasis on social relationships and team spirit by all interviewees. However, the change in touchpoints and interactions not only on project but also personal basis in virtual work have created new tensions that challenge the socialization relationships. While the ongoing pandemic crisis and regional differences might also impact relationships, this chapter will focus on the impact of virtual work.

#### 4.3.1 Getting the Job Done vs. Maintaining Personal Relationships

As described in 4.1.1, the work at the case company is characterized by demanding projects and the ambition to deliver to the satisfaction of the client. While this is top priority, all interviewees agree that a trustful relationship and healthy team spirit are required to achieve this goal. However, a year of virtual work has taken its toll on the quality of personal relationships.

##### 4.3.1.1 Socializing Slips when Workload is High

As there are usually no incidental encounters in virtual work, the personal touchpoints are mostly reduced to organized meetings or written chats. While face-to-face project meetings often include a certain degree of personal chit-chat, interviewees of all positions describe that the focus of these

meetings in virtual work is almost exclusively on the job. Further, the high number of back-to-back meetings inhibit spontaneous personal conversations.

*“It's more you talk business. So, when you have a Teams meeting, its maximum one hour, one minute of social talk, usually about the weather.” (Charlie/P)*

The reduction of socialization is not only limited to direct work relationships; office friendships have reportedly suffered as well.

*“I think I'm not as close to my colleagues as I have been before. (...) I mean, one of my best friends and my best colleagues, I only talk to her maybe every two weeks. And in the office, it was more intense, I would have talked to her every day, we would have lunch together, or have a coffee together, or whatever.” (Blake/C)*

However, there are also upsides of the reduction of personal contact as some interviewees reported improved working relationships with colleagues they previously could not connect with.

#### *4.3.1.2 Purposefully Making Room for Personal Relationships*

Thus, most interviewees describe how they must schedule meetings or designate time to cover this personal conversation and keep the personal relationship up.

*“I had a virtual coffee with a colleague yesterday. And we, you know, we pinged each other on Teams, and we were just like ‘oh, you know, I miss our chats, we haven't really sort of caught up properly’ (...) because we don't have a work project that we're both on, and so therefore some sort of some functional reason to get in touch, we just haven't talked. And so, then the network feels like it's shrunk.” (Jordan/C)*

While these intentional check-ins are seen as crucial leadership activities from both, leaders and followers, they create an even greater number of meetings that, again, increase the perceived workload and reduce time for social interactions.

*“I think you need to be (...) even more disciplined, and you need to be more attentive to what's behind the screen. And I think the way we have solved that is that we have more, a lot more meetings than we used to have. Every morning we have a nice time. We didn't have that before.” (Charlie/P)*

However, there are differences in willingness to engage in these personal relationships beyond the project work as certain partners seek to maximize time efficiencies.

*“Obviously, you need to be careful, because people in our world are very sensitive to the use of their time. (...) Because in the partner world, most people have a number of projects, and they want to deliver these projects. And they're not always driven by the interrelationship and there is obviously also money involved. (...) So, I think what is important is to make sure that you have informal contacts, besides the formal meetings, because if you're only limited to the formal meetings, then the project has no real soul.” (Luca/P)*

#### 4.3.1.3 Losing Innovativeness and Inspiration

After the initial period of ‘survival mode’ at the beginning of the pandemic, the case company has moved to ‘business as usual’ for the greater part of a year. While this reportedly works quite well, several partners remarked the difficulty to create something new: new client development, new ideas, new relationships.

*“You know, what is easy is to continue work with kind of ongoing matters (...), but opening up something new, creating new ideas, creating new relationships etc. Starting really, really energizing, you know, tracks, train of thoughts, distance ideas, is obviously, you don't click on a Teams meeting and start something revolutionary.” (Kai/P)*

#### 4.3.2 Maintaining Team Spirit vs. Formalizing Interactions

While the individual focus in personal relationships increasingly shifts towards getting the job done, leaders in higher positions step up and establish dedicated meetings to foster team spirit along their teams, offices and regions. Especially in the beginning of virtual work, a great share of these meetings has been used for a transparent information flow which was appreciated by all interviewees. However, the dedication to attend these formalized interactions after a year of virtual work differs by a lot.

##### 4.3.2.1 Making Efforts of Team Building

Most interviewees appreciate leaders frequently checking in as this conveys a message of caring, closeness and visibility and is seen as a great leadership trait. These check-ins take the form of weekly or even daily video chats, dedicated virtual fun events with the whole team or walk-and-talks in pairs. As described by some leaders, this dedication is almost seen as a duty; especially as it is role-modeled by the global leadership and thus repeated by regional leadership. However, not all leaders feel the need to set up formal interactions to keep the team spirit up.

Simultaneously, the frequency of check-ins in combination with the repetitive format create a new challenge to accustom these team building activities with their already packed calendars, causing an increasing rejection and avoidance attitude among certain followers. However, partners and consultants also describe a fear of missing out on information and connection to their teammates if they do not participate.

*“I think many of us feel that we need more time for client work. But I think it's very difficult to avoid having these meetings. It is some sort of sanity check. (...) Well, it's like in the military. You start the day by an exercise together, you meet up early in the morning and the flag goes up, you know, and then you can start your training.” (Charlie/P)*

##### 4.3.2.2 Sensing and Supporting Personal Struggles

Besides the dedicated team building efforts, leaders have been described to dedicate efforts into sensing and supporting potential personal struggles. However, in some cases, the individual struggles remained under the radar, causing unexpected and dreadful turnover that left the responsible partner wonder what could have been done better<sup>2</sup>.

---

<sup>2</sup> Due to confidentiality reasons and GDPR regulations, quotes will be left out from this section.

#### 4.3.2.3 Incipient Leader Fatigue

The dedicated team building efforts have been reported especially in the first months of virtual work, when the crisis was imminent, and the work life was shaped by uncertainty. However, the increasing focus shift to daily business and acceptance of the virtual work situation have caused a continuous reduction of these team building efforts. While this has been described by a great variety of interviewees, assistants and specialists pointed towards the great workload leaders face as the main reason for this development.

*“I think the main challenges that we've seen are leader fatigue. (...) There's nothing left in the tank, these leaders are exhausted. (...) And then things start to slip, you know, maybe it's not a one to one every week, maybe it's once every month or, you know, just because they can't, they can't fit in.”* (Nikita/S)

#### 4.3.2.4 Impacting Corporate Culture

As all interviewees described the corporate culture as caring and results-oriented, they also reported changes after one year of working virtually: the caring aspect has been strained by the great number of meetings and high workload, and the focus on results has been emphasized. While interviewees report this particularly but not exclusively for the first months, it is in line with their descriptions of less availability for help (4.2.1.3) and prioritization of getting the job done over maintaining relationships (4.3.1.1). Some though argue that the caring aspect has been emphasized since leaders now more visibly take efforts for team building and checking in (4.3.2.2), even though this might have decreased recently (4.3.2.3). The cultural change even goes so far that for some interviewees, culture is no longer tangible, and they sense that this might increase turnover intentions.

[When asked to describe the corporate culture in virtual work]

*“But to sort of define culture now. I mean, I'm not sure if I can, to be honest. Because I mean, I'm sitting here, I'm not even in [city of office]. I'm by myself, I have two dogs next to me. So, what does that mean then? You know, it is super different. Really.”* (Elliott/A)

*“I also feel that we normally were a company where, (...) like we had parties and, you know, you often would have lunch in a group or whatever. And that changes, well it doesn't change the culture, but the culture disappears a little bit. (...) But I also think that it's very difficult to keep this kind of thing up virtually. (...) And the workplace, and the people in the workplace are not as present anymore. (...) There's a high risk for the loyalty piece to the firm. Just because you're not as much part of the firm somehow.”* (Cameron/P)

#### 4.3.2.5 Internalizing the Culture and Building Trust as a New Joiner

While it is one thing to maintain culture and team spirit among existing teams, becoming a full team member and grasping the corporate culture through the computer screen from home is more difficult. The most recent joiners among our interviewees emphasized their happiness about joining at least a few weeks before the virtual work started to build first relationships in person. However, they also reported about colleagues joining during virtual work, struggling to understand and internalize the corporate culture as the previously described formalized team building interactions cannot replace in-person bonding and trust building.

[When talking about a new employee]

*“For her, it is very difficult to build the network within the firm. She has done that almost only virtually. And that is clearly quite difficult to get to know people really. (...) I mean, you really have to build up trust, trustful relationships.”* (Charlie/P)

At the same time, many interviewees also admit that they have only invested little efforts into actively including new joiners or keeping fresh relationship up when reflecting on this during our interviews.

*“Looking back, I should probably (...) reach out to them a little bit more. Because they have started and I mean, (...) we see each other on team meetings, bigger team meetings, but that is actually, yeah, it's been a limitation of my own. (...) I think it would have been much more, you know, interactive, if we'd seen each other every day in the office. So, I have probably not gotten as close to them as I would have been. Which is, which is sad when, yeah, when you say it like this and think about it.”* (Alex/C)

However, some people do not report that new joiners struggle in the virtual context, as they describe their collective efforts to thoroughly onboard and include the new employees.

*“So, a new consultant joined the firm, the day before the lockdown. (...) And actually, we managed to create a very good relationship. Not only with me, but with the entire team. It was a great, it's actually a great success. So, it works. It can work.”* (Robin/P)

### 4.3.3 Longing for Interaction vs. Resigning in Isolation

Almost all interviewees mentioned a certain longing for personal interactions in this virtual work setting. However, there seems to be a turning point, as after one year of virtual work, a certain feeling of resignation starts to settle.

#### 4.3.3.1 Tightening Social Interaction Circles

Despite the efforts to maintain social relationships and team spirit, the combination of virtual communication and demanding client projects has resulted in tightening social circles for almost all interviewees.

*“Overall, my impression is that many people have kind of drawn back into their homes. People, I feel, badly interact with anyone. (...) Naturally, [professionals] are relatively outgoing, at least most of them. But there are colleagues that, I mean, there definitely are colleagues that I haven't spoken to in a year. And I have no clue where they're at right now, how they feel, whether they already talked to others, or I don't know.”* (Cameron/P)

While one could attribute this development to virtual work, some interviewees describe how they purposefully limit their interactions to colleagues they like or work with.

*“I only communicate with people that either I like, and I would normally maybe have lunch with or coffee, and the ones that I work with. I don't communicate with anyone else, which in the office, I would do (...). And therefore, I think that relationships, some relationships just disappear.”* (Cameron/P)



#### 4.3.3.2 Tired from Virtual Communication

Another theme emerging from our empirical data was the increasing tiredness from a year of virtual communication: the reduced information depth and formalized efforts to maintain relationships increasingly create a resignation from active participation.

*“We have had competitions, we have had Friday pizza evenings, we put on wine and things and competitions on Kahoot you know, it's been great fun. (...) But you can't do it every Friday, right? I'd rather close down and be with my family.” (Kai/P)*

*“I find it draining to have video conferences the whole day. I think sometimes you feel like brain dead at the end of the day.” (Cameron/P)*

Even in work relationships, people start shielding themselves from virtual communication.

*“And initially, nobody had sort of this virtual backgrounds. Everybody had their real background. So you saw also where people were living. But you see that that is changing. More and more people are using the fake backgrounds.” (Luca/P)*

#### 4.3.3.3 Loosing Motivation and Loyalty

As a result, many interviewees report that they lose motivation and feel less connected to the firm, even though they usually are very proud to work for the case company.

*“They're not relationships anymore because you don't interact with these people. And I think that has an impact on the overall setting and the overall loyalty or feeling part, feeling to be part of something or whatever.” (Cameron/P)*

While this development is not seen by all interviewees, for others it seems so severe, that one partner even worries about greater turnover intentions.

*“And I think that the loyalty and connectedness to the office decreases after a year where you're not in the office. So, the bar for people to consider leaving, I think is lower. It's more difficult to leave the firm if you see your colleagues every day (...). And if you're just seeing each other on video, then I think for some people, it has become easier to consider speaking to competitors, or thinking of leaving the industry.” (Max/P)*

## 5 Analysis

While analyzing the interview data and uncovering interactions and tensions, we increasingly recognized theoretical aspects from our literature review in the empirical results. At the same time, the empirics brought up new aspects that we had not encountered in literature. To conceptualize relational leadership in virtual work in PSFs, this chapter interprets our empirical findings by consulting theoretical foundations to understand what role leadership dynamics and virtual work challenges play in the relational leadership tensions identified.

### 5.1 The Construction of Relational Leadership

The empirics paint a picture of leadership that is beneficial to be viewed from a relational perspective: all descriptions of leadership- and followership-like behavior were linked to interactions with leaders or followers, and no action or behavior could be looked solely through the eyes of a leader nor a follower. At the same time, the interviewees described continuous changes in their relationships the longer they worked virtually. While some of these changes were quite extensive, others were more subtle or started developing after time. Comparing, contrasting, and interpreting all interviewee reports, these developments describe how every behavior change is being met with a response, thereby constantly impacting or reinforcing one another, which we presented as tensions in chapter 4.

Our analysis of the interviewees' descriptions of leader-follower interactions shaping their relationships resembles the theory of relational leadership (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011; Uhl-Bien, 2006). Further, the reported changes since the shift to virtual work reflect our ontological stance of social constructionism (Cunliffe, 2008; Fairhurst & Grant, 2010): leaders and followers collectively construct leadership through shared interactions, thereby constantly reacting to contextual changes like virtual work. Combining the different constructions between leaders and followers to understand and visualize relational leadership in the given virtual work context at the given time is novel and contributes to our aim of conceptualizing relational leadership in virtual work in PSFs. Furthermore, the notion that time acts as an amplifying factor to contextual challenges is new and underlines the importance of understanding relational leadership to be in perpetual motion, which can only be captured in the form of snapshots.

### 5.2 Project Interactions

Our analysis has shown that the virtual project interactions are characterized by an increase in workload that is absorbed by strong personal commitment while creating an efficiency fallacy.

#### Collective Leadership

The generally high workload and challenging demands can partially be related to collective leadership: the plural leadership inherent in PSFs (Empson, 2017; Langley & Empson, 2015) can help to understand why followers juggle tasks from multiple sources; and the partners' pressuring demands to constantly deliver on client projects can potentially be traced back to their own need to continuously legitimize their position among peers (Empson, 2017). While the increasing need for followers to coordinate and manage

conflicting demands due to an increase in collective leadership in virtual work might be anticipated by virtual work researchers (Nordbäck & Espinosa, 2019), it is new to PSF research.

#### Social Learning and Transformational Leadership

The demanding behavior shows elements of transformational leadership which seeks to foster self-leadership and intellectual stimulation (Empson, 2017; Langley & Empson, 2015; Sandvik et al., 2019). However, the increasing demands with virtual work result in overwork and diminishing work-life balance, thereby jeopardizing the social learning aspects.

#### Reciprocal Influence

Even though intense working pace and constant performance pressure are considered normal and necessary to succeed, leaders and followers emphasized the voluntariness of their long working hours; Thus, they can be identified as insecure overachievers (Empson, 2017). Virtual work seems to have further increased proactive followership (Carsten et al., 2010) and stewardship (Cameron, 2011; Hayes et al., 2015) as consultants are continuously aiming to deliver towards or above leaders' expectations. Thus, they contribute to the efficiency fallacy created by an aggravated information exchange in virtual work, further encouraging leaders to keep their demands up to achieve even better results and illustrating reciprocal influence.

#### Isolation and Work-life Conflict

Whereas virtual work researchers warn about increasing isolation and work-life conflicts, especially when employees perceive little control about their work setting (Golden et al., 2008; Kossek et al., 2006; Wojcak et al., 2016), our interviews yield divergent opinions on this: While the work-life balance has improved mainly for some leaders, it has decreased for most others. However, the extended working hours and the decreased work-life balance seem to be generally accepted, potentially due to stewardship and insecurity (see reciprocal influence). Our analysis has further revealed a certain unawareness of leaders towards their followers' workload, contributing to their own efficiency fallacy and further aggravating followers' work-life balance.

#### Loss of Identification and Trust

Our analysis shows an increased results-focus, which is in line with an increased output-orientation in employee performance evaluation that further increases performance pressure (Gupta & Pathak, 2018; Schwarzmüller et al., 2018). In project interactions, no loss of identification or trust has been observed.

#### Shallow Communication

The impaired leaders' awareness of followers' workload is related to the reduced visibility in virtual communication, while the increasing number of meetings to make up for physical contact aggravate the focus on client projects and further increase working hours. As Darics (2020) and Wojcak et al. (2016) note, communication and understanding of others' behavior becomes generally harder in virtual work, increasing the effort needed to gain awareness of colleagues' workload. The resulting efficiency fallacy may be a vicious

circle: as partners notice that projects are completed faster, more projects are acquired, leading to more work.

#### Inflexible Leadership

While Cortellazzo et al. (2019) and Schwarzmüller et al. (2018) argue that virtual work fosters shared leadership, this has not been observed at the case company. Even further, leadership was associated mainly with formal positions as leaders disclaimed leadership responsibility for themselves, let alone their followers. Learning from literature, the inflexibility of leadership to adjust to virtual work could be related to some of the negative effects described in 4.1.

In summary, theory can help understand how the tensions in project interactions are created: Collective leadership increases leaders' demands that are met by strong follower commitment and thus, reciprocal influence creates the efficiency fallacy. This is enabled by shallow communication and inflexible leadership, thereby creating work-life conflicts.

### 5.3 Development Interactions

Our analysis shows that virtual work constrains development interactions by hindering learning on the go through reducing visibility and requiring proactive exposure, and inhibits the exchange of feedback as conflict potential increases.

#### Collective Leadership

While some partners are very invested in developing and coaching their followers, others shirk this responsibility by arguing that they are not technically responsible as they do not have a dedicated leadership role. This understanding is partially in line with the description of ambiguous leadership in PSFs (Empson, 2017; Langley & Empson, 2015). The touchpoints with peers and seniors become limited and thus the opportunity for junior employees to legitimize, negotiate, and maneuver to gain leadership are reduced (Empson, 2017). Overall, collective leadership can be understood as a partial driver of the feedback-avoiding culture at the case company, that has been further aggravated by virtual work.

#### Social Learning and Transformational Leadership

With reduced exposure to learning on the go and an increased avoidance of negative feedback, coaching, role-modeling, and nurturing (Empson et al., 2015) have been impacted by virtual work. Thus, the empirical results show how social learning (Empson, 2017; Sandvik et al., 2019) can become restricted in virtual work, too. While both, followers' proactiveness and leaders' willingness to support learning, have gained importance in virtual work, they have yet to be thematized in PSF and virtual work literature.

#### Reciprocal Influence

By soliciting learning and feedback, followers enact proactive followership (Carsten et al., 2010; Finlayson & Harvey, 2016) as they take initiative and actively challenge their leaders. This increase in proactivity with virtual work is in line with what Carsten et al.

(2010) describe as a sensitivity to changes in corporate context and visualizes how reciprocal influence forms development interactions and tensions.

#### Isolation and Work-Life Conflict

Decreasing exposure and visibility of employees (Maruyama & Tietze, 2012) create a need for followers to actively make their actions visible which in turn leads to an increase in leaders' workload to support their employees sufficiently (Schwarz Müller et al., 2018). It is especially difficult for new joiners who are reluctant to reach out for help, as their personal relationships have not manifested in virtual work yet (Wojcack et al., 2016), emphasizing the effect of isolation on virtual development interactions.

#### Loss of Identification and Trust

Due to reduced visibility of employees and their performance, many followers feel the urge to actively showcase their actions and performance to get the attention of their leaders and confirm their work efforts, which matches with the description by Kaplan et al. (2018) of increased manager mistrust in virtual work. However, the increased avoidance of feedback adds a new aspect to the challenges previously identified in virtual work, potentially indicating less trustful relationships.

#### Shallow Communication

In virtual work, learnings on the go are reduced through inhibited informal information exchange (Golden & Raghuram, 2010) and feedback is reduced due to less frequent touchpoints and restricted non-verbal feedback cues (Darics, 2020; Golden & Veiga, 2008; Wojcack et al., 2016). Virtual work literature recommends establishing communication norms to facilitate and enhance knowledge exchange (Cortellazzo et al., 2019; Malhotra et al., 2007), which has not happened at the case company. However, the avoidance of negative feedback due to inhibited communication and the convenience of going on mute add new perspectives to shallow communication that have not been previously addressed by literature.

#### Inflexible Leadership

The challenge of inflexible leadership (Cortellazzo et al., 2019; Schwarz Müller et al., 2018) materializes as followers describe an increasing need to proactively request feedback and support, as only few leaders report on consciously increasing coaching behavior and relationship-oriented leadership.

Overall, development interactions are characterized by an avoidance of involvement in personal development due to ambiguous leadership, which is further aggravated in virtual work by shallow communication. Followers react to this inflexible leadership by becoming more proactive to keep social learning up, reinforcing work-life conflicts for leaders and followers.

## 5.4 Socialization Interactions

Given that the overall workload has increased for many, and that virtual communication requires active effort due to lacking spontaneous meetings, the time for socialization interactions has been reduced. Thereby, the focus on project work has challenged personal relationships, efforts to

maintain team spirit have been formalized, and the general mood is characterized by a longing for interaction while some start resigning in isolation.

#### Social Learning and Transformational Leadership

Opportunities for social learning have diminished as a by-product of inhibited socialization interactions, which is exemplified by a shift in the organizational culture from collective and caring to more individualistic and results oriented. Furthermore, interviewees reported difficulties of being innovative due to the lack of inspirational exchange with others.

#### Reciprocal Influence

The interviewees revealed a general tiredness of virtual communication and an increasing tendency to withdraw into the background, thus becoming more passive followers (Carsten et al., 2010). This may further reduce the leaders' possibility for charismatic leadership and inspiration, which in turn can accelerate the disengagement of followers (Bastardoz & Van Vugt, 2019; Cameron, 2011, Hayes et al., 2015) and exemplifies reciprocal influence in socialization interactions. In virtual work, team building has been formalized out of necessity, thus adding more meetings to the already busy virtual schedules, and creating an increasing fatigue towards these meetings, both for leaders and followers, which further diminishes socialization interactions.

#### Isolation & Work-Life Conflict

Our analysis has shown that the lack of social interaction and in-person communication creates a feeling of isolation that ultimately affects motivation and loyalty negatively (Golden & Veiga, 2008; Wojcak et al., 2016). Despite initial efforts from leaders and followers to hold on to the amount of interaction before virtual work, these efforts have slowly decreased as employees started prioritizing family time to improve work-life balance. Further, many have to some degree accepted the situation and deliberately only keep in contact with those they are closest to, contributing to their own isolation.

#### Loss of Identification and Trust

As Wojcak et al. (2016) point out, getting to know people and internalizing organizational culture are considerably more difficult in virtual work. Interviewees who had been in the company for a longer period as well as new joiners were concerned about the reduced opportunities to sense and internalize the culture in virtual work, especially as the culture has become more results-oriented and less supportive in virtual work.

#### Shallow Communication

Virtual work inhibits informal communication by reducing available situations and limiting non-verbal cues (Darics, 2020; Golden et al., 2008; Wojcak et al., 2016), thereby complicating the basis on which socialization interactions are built. The interviewees confirmed these struggles, describing their combat to maintain relationships, and admitting losing contact to former work friends over after one-year virtual work. Further, they reported getting tired of virtual communication and resigning in isolation, which further exemplifies the impact of shallow communication.

Driven by shallow communication and reciprocal influence, the formalized interactions to maintain team spirit and prevent isolation have resulted in a fatigue among leaders and followers who accept isolation to improve work-life balance, which eventually impacts culture and identification with the firm.

## 6 Discussion

During the analysis, we have seen theoretical elements from literature to reappear throughout our empirics, thereby contributing to the understanding of relational leadership. This chapter starts by completing the theoretical framework with our empirical findings while considering their theoretical interpretation, and then elaborates our findings and learnings.

### 6.1 Completion of Theoretical Framework

In our initial theoretical framework (figure 2), we visualized relational leadership as shaped by leadership dynamics identified in previous PSF research and framed by virtual work context. Given the lack of relevant studies, there was no clear picture of the interactions happening between leaders and followers. Our empirical material and the theoretical analysis allow us to complete the picture (figure 5). We identified three types of interactions that occur between leaders and followers, serve as building blocks for relationships, and inform us how relational leadership is constructed in our case company: (1) project interactions, (2) development interactions, and (3) socialization interactions. Furthermore, we identified seven tensions within these interactions that provide a deeper understanding on how the leader-follower relationships form and develop, and how relational leadership in virtual work looks like in our case company. Our analysis has shown how the previously identified leadership dynamics and virtual work challenges can be recognized throughout interactions and tensions and help understand the construction of relational leadership.

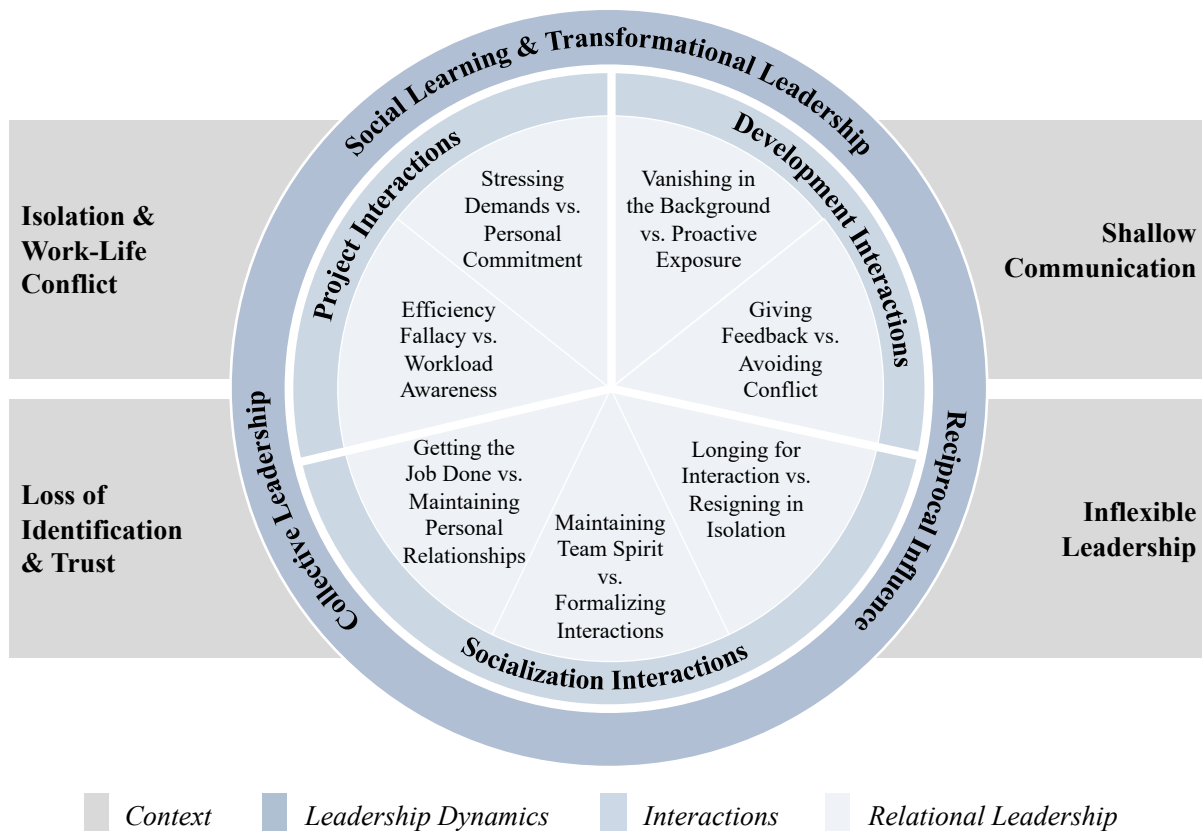


Figure 5: Theoretical Framework III – Empirical Findings



## 6.2 Elaboration of Findings and Learnings

While our analysis shows how leadership dynamics and virtual work context affect our findings of interactions and tensions, the framework visualizes this relation. However, the framework itself only captures a simplification of relational leadership. Therefore, the following section elaborates and discusses findings and learnings that complement our framework.

### 6.2.1 Seeing the Full Contextual Picture

While virtual work literature acknowledges the perceived flexibility as a crucial factor contributing to the perception and appreciation of virtual work (Kossek et al., 2006), our case study raises attention to the duration of a context, which might amplify or weaken the potential effect on relational leadership, as the change in culture and tiredness of virtual communication that only set in with time have shown.

### 6.2.2 Acknowledging Constructionism in Relational Leadership

The three interaction types present an exemplification of the interactions constructing relational leadership, and the seven tensions exemplify the relational leadership itself. The conceptualization of the tensions through contrasting different description patterns of leaders and followers highlights the importance of constructionism: there does not exist one true reality of relational leadership, but merely many individual understandings that reinforce or confront each other and thereby create the tensions we identified. It is important to look at both sides of the relationship, leaders and followers, as everyone's understanding contributes to leadership, and to acknowledge that our analysis only represents a snapshot of relational leadership at the given time.

### 6.2.3 Understanding (Inter-)Dependencies in Relational Leadership

As the framework represents the interplay of context, leadership dynamics, interactions, and tensions, it simplifies underlying dependencies and interdependencies.

#### 6.2.3.1 *Connections among Interaction Types and Tensions*

The different interaction types and tensions in our model are derived from patterns we identified during the thematical analysis. While they act as a structure for our empirical results, they cannot be clearly separated from one another. For example, the same leader-follower pair could share project, development, and socialization interactions. In a potential high workload situation, they could prioritize *“getting their job done”* instead of *“maintaining their personal relationships”*, as the latter becomes increasingly difficult in virtual work (4.3.1). While this would impact their socialization interaction directly, it could further contribute to the *“efficiency fallacy”*, as their information exchange becomes limited and the *“workload awareness”* decreases (4.1.2), thereby impacting their project interaction. Further, this could impact the development interactions, as *“giving feedback”* in virtual communication is reportedly more difficult, especially when the personal relationship is inflicted. Thus, the leader might end up *“avoiding conflict”* and keeping criticism for him/herself, thereby negatively impacting the development opportunities of the follower (4.2.2). Thus, it is important to keep in mind how interactions and tensions are intertwined, and have the potential to influence and reinforce each other.

### *6.2.3.2 Fluidity of Leaders and Followers*

While we see a rather clear differentiation of leaders (partners) and followers (consultants and assistants) in most interactions, we also see situations where leaders take the role of followers, or consultants and assistants become leaders. This is especially the case when partners are among themselves (e.g., when working together on client projects) or when someone exercises their positional leadership responsibility (e.g., when the office manager organizes meetings). The same holds true for consultants (e.g., when several consultants with different tenure work on the same task).

### *6.2.3.3 Influences Encompassing Relational Leadership*

While our framework seeks to capture a variety of factors that impact relational leadership in PSFs, a few reoccurring themes did not become designated tensions or leadership dynamics in our model. However, they are not to be neglected, but can be understood as influences encompassing relational leadership as a whole: trust and culture. As most leaders and followers emphasize the importance of trustful relationships, trust was an all-encompassing theme occurring across all interactions and tensions, and thus cannot be singled out. It rather should be understood as cause and effect of all interactions combined, thereby representing an important part of relational leadership. The same logic holds true for culture: in our case study, the corporate culture defines and shapes all interactions, and is simultaneously impacted by interactions and tensions. Thus, a change in context, e.g., through virtual work, effects the corporate culture as well (4.3.2.4).

## 7 Concluding Remarks

To conclude our thesis, we address our research question and review theoretical and practical contribution, limitations, and opportunities for future research.

### 7.1 Addressing the Research Question

Our research question can be separated into two parts.

*How are the leader-follower relationships and interactions in professional service firms affected by virtual work?*

Our thematic analysis has revealed differences in leaders' and followers' description of the same situations (tensions) that characterize the (1) project, (2) development, and (3) socialization interactions and showcase the effect of virtual work on the leader-follower relationship in our PSF case company: (1a) Stressing demands versus personal commitment, (1b) efficiency fallacy versus workload awareness, (2a) vanishing in the background versus proactive exposure, (2b) giving feedback versus avoiding conflict, (3a) getting the job done versus maintaining personal relationships, (3b) maintaining team spirit versus formalizing interactions, and (3c) longing for interaction versus resigning in isolation.

*How can relational leadership be conceptualized?*

As relational leadership is constructed by leader-follower interactions, the tensions can be understood as a snapshot of the virtual relationships. Further, the previously reviewed leadership dynamics in PSFs and virtual work challenges were helpful in interpreting our empirical findings. Thus, we conceptualize relational leadership as a construction of leader-follower interactions, represented by tensions and shaped by leadership dynamics and contextual challenges (figure 6).

### 7.2 Theoretical Contribution

While literature gives a first understanding of leadership dynamics in PSFs and virtual work challenges, little to nothing is being said about relational leadership in PSFs, especially in the virtual work context. Therefore, our thesis contributes with showcasing the three types of interactions and seven tensions that demonstrate how relational leadership is constructed by different leaders and followers in our case company. Our analysis shows how theoretical elements from leadership dynamics and virtual work challenges can be used to interpret our empirical findings. Despite our focus on virtual work in PSFs, the specific leadership dynamics and the contextual challenges used to identify and exemplify the tensions could potentially be exchanged towards another organization or context. Thus, our framework does not only represent a snapshot of relational leadership in virtual work in PSFs (figure 5), but potentially offers a general conceptualization of relational leadership that takes the respective organizational context and leadership dynamics under consideration (figure 6).



Figure 6: Theoretical Framework IV – Conceptualization for Future Research

### 7.3 Practical Contribution

Even with the limited transferability of a constructionist case study, the identified interaction types and tensions should raise awareness towards the possible origins of conflicts within companies and could therefore serve as a guide towards more harmonious organizational environments in future virtual work settings. Thereby, we want to emphasize the importance of all three interaction types, as they together contribute to a balanced leader-follower relationship. Further, the process by which the tensions and interaction types were identified might provide directions for leaders and followers who want to learn more about the potential tensions within their own relationship.

### 7.4 Limitation

To study relational leadership in virtual context in PSFs, we used the mandatory period of virtual work caused by the COVID-19 pandemic as an enabler. It is inherently impossible to single out virtual work as context since the impact of the COVID-19 situation goes beyond virtual work. The overall crisis mode has a twofold impact that we sought to consider in our findings: (1) as all industries have been impacted by COVID-19-induced uncertainty, the reduced order intake and the uncertain client situation created an internal crisis mode, leading to pay cuts and lay-offs, and (2) all employees were further impacted by restrictions beyond their workplace that potentially impacted their private life and overall well-being, and might have spilled over to their work

relationships. Even though we sought to incorporate cultural and regional differences by studying several European offices, there was no control about other contextual factors and thus, the relational leadership studied cannot exclusively be traced back to the context of virtual work.

By combining a case study with our constructionist perspective, our findings seek to represent a snapshot of relational leadership within the firm and cannot be generalized. As the identified tensions and interactions are specific to the case company, and the underlying framework has not been tested in other contexts or companies yet, a certain distance should be kept when using our findings.

## 7.5 Future Research

In the absence of established theoretical frameworks for relational leadership, a large portion of this thesis has been devoted to mapping out existing research and understanding how relationships shape leadership in PSFs in virtual work. Thus, much opportunity is left for future studies. As pointed out by Boyatzis (1998), insights generated from thematic analysis can be used as hypotheses for future quantitative studies. While the tensions found within the leader-follower interactions are specific to PSFs and the virtual work context, similar studies could be done within different organizations or contexts that will likely yield adjacent tensions that could expand our understanding beyond this thesis' results. Further examination might also be conducted with our case company, for example once the pandemic is over and a potential new way of working has been established, or to deepen our understanding of certain tensions. Finally, checking back on the application of recommendations for our case company could be intriguing.

## 8 Bibliography/References

- Alvesson, M., & Skoldberg, K. (2009). *Reflexive methodology: new vistas for qualitative research* (2nd ed.). SAGE.
- Alvesson, M., & Sveningsson, S. (2003). The great disappearing act: difficulties in doing “leadership”. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 14(3), 359-381.
- Bartsch, S., Weber, E., Büttgen, M., & Huber, A. (2020). Leadership matters in crisis-induced digital transformation: how to lead service employees effectively during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of Service Management*, 32(1), 71-85.
- Bass, B. M. (1985). Leadership: Good, better, best. *Organizational Dynamics*, 13(3), 26-40.
- Bass, B. M. (1999). Two Decades of Research and Development in Transformational Leadership. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, 8(1), 9-32.
- Bastardo, N., & Van Vugt, M. (2019). The nature of followership: Evolutionary analysis and review. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 30(1), 81-95.
- Bathini, D. R., Bathini, D. R., Kandathil, G. M., & Kandathil, G. M. (2019). An Orchestrated Negotiated Exchange: Trading Home-Based Telework for Intensified Work. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 154(2), 411-423.
- Bazeley, P. (2013). *Qualitative data analysis: practical strategies*. SAGE.
- Bell, E., & Thorpe, R. (2013). *A Very Short, Fairly Interesting and Reasonably Cheap Book about Management Research*. SAGE.
- Bligh, M. C., & Schyns, B. (2007). Leading Question: The Romance Lives On: Contemporary Issues Surrounding the Romance of Leadership. *Leadership*, 3(3), 343-360.
- Bouziri, H., Smith, D. R. M., Descatha, A., Dab, W., & Jean, K. (2020). Working from home in the time of COVID-19: how to best preserve occupational health? *Occupational and Environmental Medicine*, 77(7), 509-510.
- Boyatzis, R. E. (1998). *Transforming qualitative information: thematic analysis and code development*. SAGE.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101.
- Bryman, A., & Bell, E. (2015). *Business research methods* (4th ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Cameron, K. (2011). Responsible Leadership as Virtuous Leadership. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 98, 25-35.

- Carsten, M. K., Uhl-Bien, M., West, B. J., Patera, J. L., & McGregor, R. (2010). Exploring social constructions of followership: A qualitative study. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 21(3), 543-562.
- Contreras, F., Baykal, E., & Abid, G. (2020). E-Leadership and Teleworking in Times of COVID-19 and Beyond: What We Know and Where Do We Go. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11.
- Cortellazzo, L., Bruni, E., & Zampieri, R. (2019). The Role of Leadership in a Digitalized World: A Review. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10.
- Crouch, M., & McKenzie, H. (2006). The logic of small samples in interview-based qualitative research. *Social Science Information*, 45(4), 483-499.
- Cunliffe, A. L. (2008). Orientations to Social Constructionism: Relationally Responsive Social Constructionism and its Implications for Knowledge and Learning. *Management Learning*, 39(2), 123-139.
- Cunliffe, A. L., & Eriksen, M. (2011). Relational leadership. *Human Relations*, 64(11), 1425-1449.
- Darics, E. (2020). E-Leadership or “How to Be Boss in Instant Messaging?” The Role of Nonverbal Communication. *International Journal of Business Communication*, 57(1), 3-29.
- Denis, J., Langley, A., & Sergi, V. (2012). Leadership in the plural. *The Academy of Management Annals*, 6(1), 211-283.
- Dubois, A., & Gadde, L. (2002). Systematic combining: an abductive approach to case research. *Journal of Business Research*, 55(7), 553-560.
- Eddleston, K. A., & Mulki, J. (2017). Toward Understanding Remote Workers’ Management of Work–Family Boundaries: The Complexity of Workplace Embeddedness. *Group & Organization Management*, 42(3), 346-387.
- Empson, L. (2017). *Leading professionals: power, politics, and prima donnas*. Oxford University Press.
- Empson, L. (2020). Ambiguous authority and hidden hierarchy: Collective leadership in an elite professional service firm. *Leadership*, 16(1), 62-86.
- Empson, L., & Alvehus, J. (2020). Collective Leadership Dynamics among Professional Peers: Co-constructing an unstable equilibrium. *Organization Studies*, 41(9), 1234-1256.
- Empson, L., Muzio, D., Broschak, J., & Hinings, B. (2015). *The Oxford Handbook of Professional Service Firms*. Oxford University Press.
- Fairhurst, G. T., & Grant, D. (2010). The Social Construction of Leadership: A Sailing Guide. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 24(2), 171-210.

Finlayson, D. and Harvey, W. (2016), The Importance of Followership and Reputation in an HR Consulting Firm, Koonce, R. (Eds.), *Followership in Action*. Emerald Group Publishing Limited, 91-97.

Flick, U. (2011). *Introducing research methodology: a beginner's guide to doing a research project*. SAGE.

Flick, U. (2018). *An introduction to qualitative research* (6th ed.). SAGE.

Flyvbjerg, B. (2006). Five Misunderstandings About Case-Study Research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 12(2), 219-245.

Fonner, K. L., & Roloff, M. E. (2010). Why Teleworkers are More Satisfied with Their Jobs than are Office-Based Workers: When Less Contact is Beneficial. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 38(4), 336-361.

Gajendran, R. S., & Harrison, D. A. (2006). The good, the bad, and the unknown about telecommuting: Meta-analysis of individual consequences and mechanism of distributed work. *Academy of Management Annual Meeting Proceedings*, 2006(1), D1-D6

Gardner, K., & Lister, K. (2017). *2017 State of Telecommuting in the U.S. Employee Workforce*. Global Workplace Analytics. [<https://www.flexjobs.com/employer-blog/key-findings-2017-state-of-telecommuting-report/>]

Gemmill, G., & Oakley, J. (1992). Leadership: An Alienating Social Myth? *Human Relations*, 45(2), 113-129.

Gerda, M., Öun Kandela, & Türk Kulno. (2011). Virtual work usage and challenges in different service sector branches. *Baltic Journal of Management*, 6(3), 342-356.

Gillham, B. (2005). *Research interviewing: the range of techniques*. Open University Press.

Golden, T. D. (2006). The Role of Relationships in Understanding Telecommuter Satisfaction. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 27(3), 319-340.

Golden, T. D., & Fromen, A. (2011). Does it matter where your manager works? Comparing managerial work mode (traditional, telework, virtual) across subordinate work experiences and outcomes. *Human Relations*, 64(11), 1451-1475.

Golden, T. D., & Raghuram, S. (2010). Teleworker knowledge sharing and the role of altered relational and technological interactions. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 31(8), 1061-1085.

Golden, T. D., & Veiga, J. F. (2008). The impact of superior–subordinate relationships on the commitment, job satisfaction, and performance of virtual workers. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 19(1), 77-88.



- Golden, T. D., Veiga, J. F., & Dino, R. N. (2008). The impact of professional isolation on teleworker job performance and turnover intentions: Does time spent teleworking, interacting face-to-face, or having access to communication-enhancing technology matter? *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 93(6), 1412-1421.
- Guest, G., Bunce, A., & Johnson, L. (2006). How Many Interviews Are Enough?: An Experiment with Data Saturation and Variability. *Field Methods*, 18(1), 59-82.
- Gupta, S., & Pathak, G. S. (2018). Virtual team experiences in an emerging economy: a qualitative study. *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, 31(4), 778-794.
- Hayes, L. A., Caldwell, C., Licona, B., & Meyer, T. E. (2015). Followership behaviors and barriers to wealth creation. *The Journal of Management Development*, 34(3), 270-285.
- He, S., Lai, D., Mott, S., Little, A., Grock, A., Haas, M. R. C., & Chan, T. M. (2020). Remote e-Work and Distance Learning for Academic Medicine: Best Practices and Opportunities for the Future. *Journal of Graduate Medical Education*, 12(3), 256-263.
- Hinings, B., Muzio, D., Broschak, J., & Empson, L. (2015). Researching Professional Service Firms: An Introduction and Overview. In L. Empson, D. Muzio, J. Broschak & B. Hinings (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Professional Service Firms*. Oxford University Press, 1-22.
- Hoegl, M., & Muethel, M. (2016). Enabling Shared Leadership in Virtual Project Teams: A Practitioners' Guide. *Project Management Journal*, 47(1), 7-12.
- Jackson, B., & Parry, K. (2011). *A Very Short Fairly Interesting and Reasonably Cheap Book About Studying Leadership* (2nd ed.). SAGE.
- Jünemann, E., & Lloyd, B. (2003). *Consulting for virtual excellence: virtual teamwork as a task for consultants*. *Team Performance Management*, 9(7), 182-189.
- Kaplan, S., Engelsted, L., Lei, X., & Lockwood, K. (2018). Unpackaging Manager Mistrust in Allowing Telework: Comparing and Integrating Theoretical Perspectives. *Journal of Business and Psychology*, 33(3), 365-382.
- Kossek, E. E., Lautsch, B. A., & Eaton, S. C. (2006). Telecommuting, control, and boundary management: Correlates of policy use and practice, job control, and work-family effectiveness. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 68(2), 347-367.
- Kotter, J. P. (2001). What Leaders Really Do. *Harvard Business Review*, December 2001.
- Langley, A., & Empson, L. (2015). Leadership and Professionals: Multiple Manifestations of Influence in Professional Service Firms. In L. Empson, D. Muzio, J. Broschak & B. Hinings (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Professional Service Firms*. Oxford University Press, 163-188.

- Lupu, I., & Empson, L. (2015). Illusio and overwork: playing the game in the accounting field. *Accounting, Auditing, & Accountability*, 28(8), 1310-1340.
- Malhotra, A., Majchrzak, A., & Rosen, B. (2007). Leading Virtual Teams. *Academy of Management Perspectives*, 21(1), 60-70.
- Maruyama, T., & Tietze, S. (2012). From anxiety to assurance: concerns and outcomes of telework. *Personnel Review*, 41(4), 450-469.
- Meindl, J. R. (1995). The romance of leadership as a follower-centric theory: A social constructionist approach. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 6(3), 329-341.
- Mihhailova, G. (2017). Virtual managers' perspective on adoption of new work forms – Case of Estonian service sector. *International Journal of Service Management and Sustainability*, 2(2)
- Nordbäck, E., S., & Espinosa, J. A. (2019). Effective Coordination of Shared Leadership in Global Virtual Teams. *Journal of Management Information Systems*, 36(1), 321-350.
- Northouse, P. G. (2019). *Leadership* (8th ed.). SAGE.
- Oc, B., & Bashshur, M. R. (2013). Followership, leadership and social influence. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 24(6), 919-934.
- Regulation, (2016/679). *The protection of natural persons with regard to the processing of personal data and on the free movement of such data*. European Parliament, Council of the European Union. [<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2016/679/oj>]
- Riggio, R. E. (2014). Followership Research: Looking Back and Looking Forward. *Journal of Leadership Education*, 13(4), 88-99
- Riggio, R. E. (2020). Why Followership? *New Directions for Student Leadership*, 2020(167), 15-22.
- Sandvik, A. M., Selart, M., Schei, V., & Martinsen, Ø L. (2019). Setting the Scene: Partners' Leadership Behavior and Employees' Perceptions of Work Performance in Professional Service Firms. *Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies*, 26(4), 441-453.
- Saunders, M., Lewis, P., & Thornhill, A. (2007). *Research methods for business students* (4th ed.). Pearson Education Limited.
- Schwarz Müller, T., Brosi, P., Duman, D., & Welp, I. M. (2018). How Does the Digital Transformation Affect Organizations? Key Themes of Change in Work Design and Leadership. *Management Review*, 29(2), 114-138.

- Slevitch, L. (2011). Qualitative and Quantitative Methodologies Compared: Ontological and Epistemological Perspectives. *Journal of Quality Assurance in Hospitality & Tourism*, 12(1), 73-81.
- Uhl-Bien, M. (2006). Relational Leadership Theory: Exploring the social processes of leadership and organizing. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 17(6), 654-676.
- Vega, R. P., Anderson, A. J., & Kaplan, S. A. (2015). A Within-Person Examination of the Effects of Telework. *Journal of Business and Psychology*, 30(2), 313-323.
- Wakefield, R. L., Leidner, D. E., & Garrison, G. (2008). A model of conflict, leadership, and performance in virtual teams. *Information Systems Research*, 19(4), 434-455.
- Wojcak, E., Bajzikova, L., Sajgalikova, H., & Polakova, M. (2016). How to Achieve Sustainable Efficiency with Teleworkers: Leadership Model in Telework. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 229(2016), 33-41.
- World Health Organization. (2020). *Getting your workplace ready for COVID-19: How COVID-19 spreads*.  
[<https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/331584/WHO-2019-nCov-workplace-2020.2-eng.pdf>]
- Yin, R. K. (2014). *Case study research: design and methods* (5th ed.). SAGE.
- Zaleznik, A. (1992). Managers and leaders: are they different? *Harvard Business Review*, March/April 1992.

## 9 Appendix

### 9.1 Interview Guide

As described in 3.4.3, the semi-structured interviews were steered by a prepared interview guide, where from each of the numbered topics aside from the first one, the rather open-ended general question was asked first. This was then followed with the italicized sub-questions as needed, depending on the direction the conversation was taking and the amount of information the interviewee had already provided in response to the first question. Below is an example of an interview guide used.

\* refers to “*now in virtual work*”

#### **I. Introduction of interviewers, thesis topic and administrative details**

- Confidentiality and consent to GDPR regulations
- Interviewee background information
  - *Name*
  - *Position*
  - *Office/Location*
  - *Tenure (at the case company)*
  - *Previous education/work experience*

#### **II. General job**

- How would you describe your job?
  - *How would you describe your tasks and responsibilities?*

#### **III. Virtual work**

- How would you describe your work life now in virtual work?
  - *What are the top three challenges you currently face\*?*
  - *How would you describe your work life balance\*? How have your working hours been affected\*? Do you work more or less in total? How do you prioritize work and private life\*?*
  - *How do you feel are your actions visible within the organization\*?*
  - *How would you describe the personal development opportunities\*? How do you think does virtual work impact your future career chances?*
  - *How would you describe your (teams') productivity\*?*

#### **IV. Virtual relationships**

- How would you describe your relationship with other people at [the case company] now in virtual work?
  - *How would you describe has the quality of relationships developed \*? Could you give an example? Towards co-workers, subordinates, managers?*
  - *How has your communication with others changed\*? How do you feel about that\*?*
  - *Could you describe what it is like to work as a team\*?*

- *How would you describe does virtual work impact your trust in other team members?*
- *How do you experience working with new people, or people you haven't worked with before\*? Could you give an example?*
- *How would you describe [the case company] culture? How is it now in virtual work?*

#### **V. Virtual followership**

- How would you describe your contribution for [the case company] now in virtual work?
  - *What does it mean to you to work at [the case company]\*?*
  - *Could you give us an example of an engaged or 'ideal' employee\*? Has that changed in virtual work?*
  - *How would you describe your role in a team?*
  - *How do you perceive feedback\*? How do you give feedback\*?*

#### **VI. Virtual leadership**

- How would you describe a great leader\*?
  - *Could you give us an example of great leadership\*?*
  - *How would you say has your understanding of leadership changed\*?*
  - *How would you describe the interplay of leaders at [the case company]\*?*
  - *What role does the work-life balance of your employees play in your leadership\*?*
  - *Could you give us an example when you shared responsibility with others\*?*
  - *Could you give us an example of a situation where you yourself stepped up as a leader\*?*

#### **VII. Concluding questions**

- How would you describe your vision of a future workplace post-pandemic? What challenges do you see related to that?
- Is there anything else you would like to add?

## 9.2 Coding Scheme and Overview of Interviewees Mentioning Each Code

‘X’ means that the respective interviewee mentioned that code. As in the constructionist view every perspective counts, we included even singularly mentioned codes in our analysis.

				Partners						Consultants						Assistants			Specialists								
Interaction	Tension	Code pattern	Code	Cameron	Francis	Max	Robin	Charlie	Kai	Luca	Blake	Harper	Jordan	Andrea	Alex	René	Kim	Elliott	Jean	Sasha	Andy	Chris	Nikita	Jamie			
Project interactions (4.1)	Stressing Demand vs. Personal Commitment (4.1.1)	Partners Expect Full Commitment of Followers (4.1.1.1)	Partners' expectations have always been high						x		x		x														
			Partners' expectations have increased with virtual work																		x						
		Consultants are Committed to Perform According to the Partners' Demands (4.1.1.2)	Consultants are intrinsically motivated to deliver									x				x		x			x						
			Partners demand and role-model performance									x				x											
		Uncoordinated Demands from Multiple Partners Piling Up (4.1.1.3)	Working with different partners requires more coordination in virtual work					x				x						x			x						
		Internal Meetings Aggravate Focus on Client Projects (4.1.1.4)	Number of virtual meetings take away focus from project execution									x															
	Flexibility of Work Equals Longer Days (4.1.1.5)	Personal commitment creates longer hours in virtual work																		x		x					
	Efficiency Fallacy vs. Workload Awareness (4.1.2)	Reduction of Traveling has Lightened up Partners' Schedules (4.1.2.1)	Partners work less in virtual work	x			x																				
			Partners work more in virtual work						x	x												x	x				
			Partners are more productive in virtual work					x	x	x	x											x					
		Consultants have Cut Back on their Work-Life Balance (4.1.2.2)	Consultants work more in virtual work														x		x								
		Assistants use Former Commuting Times to Compensate for Higher Workload (4.1.2.3)	Assistants work during former commuting time in virtual work																x	x	x						
		Partners Tolerate Increased Workload and Hours of Followers (4.1.2.4)	Partners assume higher efficiency in virtual work				x	x																			
			Partners do not feel responsible checking on followers' working hours	x						x			x		x												
			Working hours are less visible in virtual work				x	x							x									x			
		Continuous Efforts to Keep Work Life Boundaries up (4.1.2.5)	Work-life balance with virtual work more difficult than before	x							x			x											x		
			Partners & assistants successful in maintaining boundaries despite virtual work	x		x					x									x							
			Consultants feel pressured to respond outside work hours											x			x							x			
			Smaller living situations make boundaries difficult											x													

				Partners							Consultants					Assistants			Specialists							
Interaction	Tension	Code pattern	Code	Cameron	Francis	Max	Robin	Charlie	Kai	Luca	Blake	Harper	Jordan	Andrea	Alex	René	Kim	Elliott	Jean	Sasha	Andy	Chris	Nikita	Jamie		
Development interactions (4.2)	Introduction	Introduction	Developing others is considered to be an important leadership quality									x				x	x					x				
			Partners' engagement level in professional development differ	x						x	x															
	Vanishing in the Background vs. Proactive Exposure (4.2.1)	Aggravated Access to Client Calls (4.2.1.1)	Consultants have less opportunities to observe client calls in virtual work											x								x			x	
			Virtual work facilitates access to observe client calls									x										x				
			New joiners experience more difficulties to learn through observations in virtual work								x		x		x											
		Increased Efforts of Reaching Out for Advice and Problem Solving (4.2.1.2)	Less exposure to learning on the go in virtual work				x								x		x	x		x			x	x		
			Leaders offer advice less often as followers become invisible																							x
			Followers are reaching out for advice more actively in virtual work								x		x						x							
			New joiners are reluctant to reach out for advice in virtual work									x														
			Leaders struggle with increased demand for help in virtual work	x			x	x									x									
			Problems remain unaddressed as calendars are packed				x	x																		
		Less Barriers for Short Inquiries (4.2.1.3)	Virtual communication facilitates quick inquiries				x	x					x								x					
			Distance outweighs pros of virtual communication for short inquiries			x									x											
		Need to Make Actions Visible (4.2.1.4)	Followers actively raise attention to their actions in virtual work										x		x						x					
			More virtual meetings create more opportunities for visibility												x									x		
			Leaders notice increased follower' proactivity in virtual work				x	x																		
			Leaders do not notice an increased follower' proactivity in virtual work			x																				
		Convenience of Going on Mute (4.2.1.5)	Virtual work facilitates to become more passive in meetings	x										x	x		x									
	Giving Feedback vs. Avoiding Conflict (4.2.2)	Introduction	Regular development plans are unimpacted by virtual work						x			x			x					x	x		x			
			Having a mentor is important for everyone	x							x	x	x		x											
			Avoiding feedback is part of feedback culture	x		x		x					x	x		x						x				
			Giving feedback is important for great leadership		x	x	x	x							x				x			x		x		
		Choosing the Right Virtual Communication Mode (4.2.2.1)	Choosing the right virtual communication mode for feedback	x				x																		
			Virtual communication facilitates feedback due to physical distance											x												
		Restricted Non-Verbal Feedback Hints (4.2.2.2)	Virtual work aggravates feedback through subtle hints	x																						
		Avoiding Negative Feedback (4.2.2.3)	Amplified avoidance of negative feedback in virtual work						x															x		
			Partners that usually like to give feedback avoid negative feedback in virtual work				x					x														
			Leaders have less energy to give feedback in virtual work													x						x				
		Requesting Direct Feedback (4.2.2.4)	Followers proactively request feedback in virtual work										x	x	x									x		
			Leaders don't see increased demand for feedback in virtual work								x															
		Losing Touchpoints for Occasional Mentoring (4.2.2.5)	Virtual work reduces touchpoints for occasional mentoring			x																x				

Interaction	Tension	Code pattern	Code	Partners							Consultants					Assistants			Specialists					
				Cameron	Francis	Max	Robin	Charlie	Kai	Luca	Blake	Harper	Jordan	Andrea	Alex	René	Kim	Elliott	Jean	Sasha	Andy	Chris	Nikita	Jamie
Socialization interactions (4.3)	Introduction	Introduction	Corporate culture is caring and results-oriented		x	x	x					x		x			x				x			
	Getting the Job Done vs. Maintaining Personal Relationships (4.3.1)	Socializing Slips when Workload is High (4.3.1.1)	Virtual meetings focus mostly on project work					x	x	x	x		x	x	x									
			Back-to-back virtual meetings inhibit spontaneous conversations													x								
			Office friendships suffer from virtual work								x		x									x		
			Virtual work improves working relationships					x										x						
			Partners schedule virtual meetings for personal conversations	x		x		x	x	x	x													
		Purposefully Making Room for Personal Relationships (4.3.1.2)	Regular checkins are an important leadership skill			x	x			x					x							x		
			Number of virtual meetings increases workload and reduces time for interaction								x													
			Partners do not want to participate in team building to maximize efficiencies								x													
		Losing Innovativeness and Inspiration (4.3.1.3)	Innovative actions are inhibited by virtual work					x	x	x														
	Maintaining Team Spirit vs. Formalizing Interactions (4.3.2)	Making Efforts of Team Building (4.3.2.1)	Fostering team building is a great leadership quality		x	x	x	x				x			x	x		x			x			
			Leaders perceive own engagement as duty													x							x	
			Leaders don't feel need for formal interactions to keep team spirit up		x																			
			Making room for virtual team building is difficult in packed calendars					x				x			x									
		Sensing and Supporting Personal Struggles (4.3.2.2)	Leaders have difficulties to sense and support struggles in virtual work				x								x									
		Incipient Leader Fatigue (4.3.2.3)	Leaders engage less in team building than at beginning of virtual work							x			x			x		x		x			x	
			Culture has become less caring in virtual work				x												x					
		Impacting Corporate Culture (4.3.2.4)	Culture has become more caring in virtual work		x								x											
			Culture has become less tangible in virtual work which creates turnover intentions	x															x					
		Internalizing the Culture and Building Trust as a New Joiner (4.3.2.5)	New joiners struggle internalizing culture in virtual work					x	x	x	x							x						
			Existing employees make little efforts to include new joiners													x		x						x
			Partners do not see difficulties for new joiners as they are very engaged				x																	
		Longing for Interaction vs. Resigning in Isolation (4.3.3)	Introduction	Longing for social interaction in virtual work				x	x		x		x	x		x	x		x	x	x	x	x	
				Social circles tighten in virtual work	x						x		x	x		x		x	x		x			
				Social interactions are purposefully limited	x								x									x		
Tired from Virtual Communication (4.3.3.2)			Resignation to participate team building activities increases			x	x	x	x				x		x									
			Individuals start shielding themselves from virtual communication							x		x												
	Individuals feel less connected and motivated		x			x		x		x							x		x					
Loosing Motivation and Loyalty (4.3.3.3)	Individuals see no change in motivation						x																	
	Turnover intentions become worrying				x																			



### 9.3 Respondent Validation from Case Company

*"On a personal note, I must admit I read the entire document and found it fascinating. Firstly in their ability to use pre-existing frameworks to very accurately describe many aspects of our culture (...). I had never seen such a clear description of how we interact with each other. But perhaps even more interesting were the insights from the interviews. They seemed very honest and heartfelt about the many challenges of working virtually.*

*My compliments to the students. "*

(Legal representative of the case company)

## 9.4 Additional Quotes from Empirical Results

### Project Interactions (4.1)

*“So, when I was hired, and probably up to even three years ago, my role was very much as a support. I was a consultant, supporting a couple of our partners, working on a few different projects. So I'd be... they would be the ones taking the lead on client engagements, they would be the ones winning the business, they would be the ones handling the process, but I was providing a lot of the support in terms of finding the candidates, helping with interviews, but it was very much sort of that helping role.” (Jordan/C)*

*“So, the assistants, we work with our assigned partners, it can be one, one or two. (...). And my role is to be sort of the project coordinator, which is a very broad role. And it depends, you know, on the client and each assignment, but in general, you can say that I handle all the practicalities, contacts, you know, with the client, booking meetings, and sending reports, proofing reports, making sure that you know, everyone is aligned, making sure that we're meeting all deadlines. So, it's, yeah, a lot of management and stakeholder management as well, as bringing everyone in the team together in it.” (Elliott/A)*

### Consultants are Committed to Perform According to the Partners' Demands (4.1.1.1)

*“We work a lot. So we work late hours always. (...) So I would say, we, we, I don't have so many hours free, I would say of my you know, you know, for my family and you know. It's a choice, of course.” (René/C)*

### Uncoordinated Demands from Multiple Partners Piling Up (4.1.1.3)

*“It plays an enormous role. Actually, I worry about it every day. And for example, just this morning, last night, a question came in. And it was a valid question, right? Sometimes I really say this is not an important question, we already have five urgent projects in the queue. But something came in and I checked with the team and I said, you know, do we have an easy answer to this, otherwise, I will take it on. And, and then. So we had a quick discussion. And I took it on, I said, don't worry about this anymore, I will correspond with this person directly, the senior partner. But I think there's a limit to how much I can do that, right. And if the, if the, if the team is legitimately having multiple projects, and they don't feel empowered to say, I can help you next week, but not this week, then I'm the one that needs, wants to and needs to step in. But it does occupy so much of my time, which is quality of the outcomes, let's say smoothness of the team's operations. And frankly, team happiness, right? I don't want everybody anyone to have too much stress on a weekly basis.” (Sasha/S)*

### Flexibility of Work Equals Longer Days (4.1.1.5)

Even when their own well-being is at risk, productivity is seen as the most important factor.

*“I think it kind of it goes in peaks and troughs, I think productivity, you go through periods of it being really high. Especially because, you know, my personal experience has been that my direct line manager (...) is the type of boss who I want to do a good job for (...). I feel engaged and therefore motivated to be productive and, you know, do things efficiently. But on the flip side of that, I think because everyone has been quite busy as a team, you do ultimately end up reaching burnout and (...) your productivity levels, I think can then drop.*

*And I think that just depends on where in the cycle you are. So, you know, sometimes the busier we are the better because you have no choice but to just get it done. Whereas (...) in quieter periods, even though you have more time to do it, I think it can be (...) harder maybe to sort of keep your focus and to execute productively. So, it kind of ebbs and flows. For my experience.” (Harper/C)*

#### **Reduction of Traveling has Lightened up Partners’ Schedules (4.1.2.1)**

*“Because it's no doubt that our top leaders have worked 24/7. I think every country manager and many partners and consultants have worked really, really hard.” (Charlie/P)*

*“Um, I think that we are productive, or maybe even more productive in a way, which is quite amazing. I mean, number one, we don't have to travel anymore. That saves a lot of time. Meeting clients, over lunch, and so on. Those kind of meetings have been cut down to a minimum. (..) So no, I'm quite pleased with the, with the level we produce.” (Charlie/P)*

#### **Assistants use Former Commuting Times to Compensate for Higher Workload (4.1.2.3)**

*“I think I work more, absolutely, because you know, you lose sort of the commute time. So I'm definitely adding, you know, maybe an hour, at least an hour to my work day, which is probably also why it's better because you, you sort of do that effortlessly.” (Elliott/A)*

*“Since you're more accessible, it also means that you sometimes get phone calls and Teams chatting in late in the evening (...). So before when you leave the office, it was like, now I'm checking out I'm leaving for the day, and usually I didn't get contacted after I left the office. But now it's even more so that I get questions even late in the evening.” (Jean/A)*

#### **Partners Tolerate Increased Workload and Hours of Followers (4.1.2.4)**

*“It is a little bit tough, because you have more pressure, and you need to be strong on your work life balance, and you need to put your own boundaries. No one will help you, you know, saying, ‘Oh, you stood in the office, and it's six, you should go home.’ No one will tell you that, you know, there's no one around. So, you need to kind of impose this self-discipline and be strong when people say, ‘Come on, it's only a meeting from seven to 7:30’. But then you would say ‘Yeah, but yesterday was another person who told me if another meeting from seven to 7:30, you know’, so it's Yeah. Yeah. So, I would say it's fine. But you have to kind of know what you can do and what you can't do. Yeah.” (Chris/S)*

*“What I worry about is that we've got a lot of people now who have essentially been running hard for over a year, because no one's really taken a proper break in that time frame in the way that we would really establish it before. And we're asking them to work even harder to go... again, now. (...) How much of this is COVID related and how much of this is virtual related? I do worry that some of it is because (...) teams will get driven harder for longer because of the virtual setup than we would have done in person. In person, the office manager would have walked around and said ‘Why have we got all these people in the office at nine o'clock at night? Hang on that doesn't instinctively feel right, that we're constantly having that.’ In a virtual that's very easy to hide that.” (Jordan/C)*

#### **Continuous Efforts to Keep Work Life Boundaries up (4.1.2.5)**

*"I try to be disciplined. So usually when I lock down the computer, then I don't open it again later on in the evening, unless I have to. I avoid it. I rather start early in the morning. I'd rather do that. And I also avoid working during weekends. I did that before. But now I try not to do that. And then I also try to be disciplined in exercising by walking as I do now."* (Charlie/P)

[When talking about partners]

*"Yeah, so they do have, yeah, they work a lot. They work late at night. So yeah, you would, they would, they don't see the boundaries as much as I do. They earn a lot of money as well. So, it's also normal that they work a lot. (...) So, this is a good thing on one side, and then the more negative thing is careful not to make it 24 hour, 24 day work, you know, it's something you want to avoid."* (Chris/S)

Besides their commitment to deliver according to their partners' demands (4.1.1.2), consultants often have smaller living arrangements and thus greater difficulties in creating physical barriers between work and privacy.

*"And it's hard to differentiate between work and home life, when you sort of (...) work and eat at the same place."* (Harper/C)

#### **Development Interactions (4.2)**

*"So that's my perfect leader, promote, and demand and motivate and be respectful and thankful for the team. (...) If you don't have someone who is demanding from you the best, you won't be able to give the best. But at the same time, he has to promote you, and give you the possibility to give everything and to work at your best."* (Kim/A)

#### **Increased Efforts of Reaching Out for Advice and Problem Solving (4.2.1.2)**

*"I would say the second thing I find difficult is for the younger person getting the drill and getting trained is more difficult because you cannot ask your stupid question that you would have, you know when I started, I had someone in my office and I would be able to ask him questions every 10 or 15 minutes but some stupid thing. In this environment they cannot do it anymore because you cannot possibly call someone every five to 10 minutes. If you see what I mean."* (Robin/P)

*"The issue of course, (...) it gives much more pressure to also be available all the time and make sure that you are there and then you can answer and then you have relevance and... I think it has a bit of pressure."* (Robin/P)

#### **Need to Make Actions Visible (4.2.1.4)**

*"It's in a way almost higher because we, we've worked through Teams quite a lot anyway before. And now everyone does it. (...) Before it was much more telephone conferences, and not as many meetings overall. So, I think the visibility is higher."* (Charlie/P)

#### **Convenience of Going on Mute (4.2.1.5)**

*"I had some feedback the other day, somebody rang me and said 'Are you okay, you looked quite annoyed in that meeting. And you didn't say much.' And I was like, 'Oh, I'm really sorry. I wasn't annoyed. But I was trying to get my emails done. (...) And so I was on mute.' I wasn't paying attention in the same way, actually, I think have been quite... (...) And it was clearly getting to that point of, I'm just tired of this. I'm going to go on mute. And I'm going to go, yeah, I'll get I'll use this time for other things. Which distinctively I know, is not the right thing, or necessarily helpful. But it sort of was a coping strategy, I think of just getting through it." (Jordan/C)*

#### **Giving Feedback vs. Avoiding Conflict (4.2.2)**

*"Because although we're very caring culture we usually, when there is an issue, you wouldn't tell this person, you just wouldn't work with this person again, but you wouldn't give feedback and then, at a certain time, no one wants to work with this person and the person still doesn't know about it because he didn't get any feedback so that's an area where we could really improve" (Blake/C)*

#### **Avoiding Negative Feedback (4.2.2.3)**

*"And I notice it within myself, giving feedback as well as receiving it. So I've definitely got less energy to (...) do that. And partly that's been increased client demands. But I think probably the biggest part is it's just hard work. (...) It's easy to sacrifice that." (Jordan/C)*

#### **Purposefully Making Room for Personal Relationships (4.3.1.2)**

*"My assistant and I work a lot. (...) And sometimes we just need to plan to check in and say, you know, 'How are things, how are your daughters?', and you know, and that is not normal. It's not automatic to me, but I need to do that. (...) It could be weeks where we actually don't speak about ourselves. And that's happening. And when you're in office, it's happening automatically." (Kai/P)*

*"But I think the people you like to work with are the ones that are a little on the one hand, give it the personal touch and make sure that everybody feels a bit at ease. These, on the other hand are very clear what they want to achieve, what needs to be done." (Luca/P)*

#### **Losing Innovativeness and Inspiration (4.3.1.3)**

*"Another thing is inspiration. In order to develop and do a great job, develop the business, develop the direction in a search it's very good to bounce ideas. (...) What's negative is that sometimes you need to bounce ideas and agree things with colleagues. And that becomes a bit more static, since you cannot just pause by their desk or take them to the coffee machine. And you have to almost book a meeting." (Charlie/P)*

#### **Making Efforts of Team Building (4.3.1.1)**

*"Also from the top management, (...) they are interested in (...) our well-being not only as employees, but also as human beings. (...) The virtual world has influenced it in a really positive way because (...) the management is more hands on in regards of setting up huddles, catch ups, status, or just, you know, setting up 15 minutes just to see how you are."*

*And I think it got really more systematic, but in a way, even if it's more systematic, I believe it's genuine as well.” (René/C)*

*“I have my hallway chats that I (...) make sure that I have on my calendar just to make sure I talk to people in the firm and how they're doing. But that's almost part of my job in a way.” (Jamie/S)*

#### **Incipient Leader Fatigue (4.3.2.3)**

[When talking about her office manager]

*“If she would have more time, she would be doing it, more (...) Because she's wanting to do it. But I can see from working close to her, that it's not a matter about not wanting or not thinking of it, she really thinks of that. But sometimes she doesn't have the time.” (René/C)*

*“I believe she should have been even more visible during these times. (...) I know that she has tons of things in her calendar, but it's easy to miss maybe a colleague who isn't feeling well, something like that, if you don't check-in every now and then. (...) She's really a good leader, but um, maybe just that she might lose some in the process while working at home.” (Jean/A)*

#### **Impacting Corporate Culture (4.3.2.4)**

*“Definitely it went towards results first, before balancing back to caring. So, in the moment of, I would say fear, (...) what we reverted to was essentially ‘Everybody just shut up and work, because whatever work we have, we need to deliver it and we need to get paid. Because if we don't, we, all of us won't be around the table’. So, in the kind of moment of fear we definitely first reverted to results.” (Max/P)*

*“But of course, you struggle to have this kind of good sense of culture, even though like, we have tried to have this pizza evening meetings with families (...) but for me, it's not the same as meeting in person and meeting at a restaurant with the office. It tends to be a little bit stiff. Trying to have this... also trying to have this team building activities online. It's not, it's not giving you as much as meeting in person. Of course. It's not.” (Jean/A)*

#### **Internalizing the Culture and Building Trust as a New Joiner (4.3.2.5)**

*“Now that, you know, we onboarded a new assistant. To sort of show her our culture is almost impossible, because she's only met me and two partners, you know, it's very hard.” (Elliott/A)*

*“So, so we knew each other for what, you know, four or five months before this happened. But since then, you know, we don't work together. And that sort of deep connection hadn't really happened. (...) Now it's like, you know, I have to make a conscious effort to reach out in another way. So usually, you only talk about work.” (Elliott/A)*

#### **Tired from Virtual Communication (4.3.3.2)**

*“So, yeah, we used to have all of these let's do 30 minutes, at the end of the week, virtual drinks, and it just died pretty... I'd like to think of myself as quite social and I went to one of these, not doing that again. (...) It's just not worth it.” (Jordan/C)*

*“Yeah, I think exhausted is the word, you know, people reference the term Zoom fatigue. And I think it's a real thing.” (Harper/C)*

#### **Loosing Motivation and Loyalty (4.3.3.3)**

*“Well, I'm proud of that, of course, because we are one of the top firms. And it's a big part of my life. Of course, I mean, I spend a lot of time working, and really enjoy what I do. So, yeah, it's important to me. (...) And this has a negative effect on the culture, you feel less attached to the company as well, due to that.” (Blake/C)*