WHAT ABOUT THE LEADER?

EXAMINING THE EFFECTS OF REMOTE WORK ON LEADERS' STRESS

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Abstract:

At the beginning of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic reached Europe and forced companies to send their personnel home while somehow keeping their businesses running. This played into the digitalization trend, making remote work the new norm. As homes became offices, it put strain on all levels of society while the line between private life and work blurred. While the demand for mental health services has increased during the pandemic, leaders have been responsible for their subordinates' workplace health. Since crises increase demands on leaders, and leaders' health impacts organizations, this paper examines how leading in a remote work environment during the pandemic has affected leaders' stress. With a qualitative cross-sectional design and an interpretive philosophy, data was collected during the spring of 2022 using semi-structured interviews from a diverse number of sectors. The results display the wide range of stressors and stress relievers facing managers in remote leadership during the two-year period of the pandemic, addressing themes such as communication, work-life balance, responsibility, and support. Findings suggest that the impact of increasing demands on leaders' perceived stress is related to individual factors such as experience, personality, and perceived control realized in practice. Since the boundaries of responsibility and perceived control are socially constructed, they extend as far as the leaders realize their control. Concludingly, the importance of control is underlined as the key to balancing high demands in a work environment characterized by blurred boundaries.

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background

1.1.1 Remote Work in a Pandemic

At the beginning of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic (henceforth the pandemic) hit the world and caused innumerable consequences. In a heartbeat, companies were forced to send everyone home and somehow keep their businesses running. What was once a somewhat unusual work type associated with certain occupations or as an effective stress management intervention had now become the norm: remote work (RW) was the way forward, whether one liked it or not (Kröll et al., 2017). As homes became offices, the line between private life and work blurred and put strain on all levels of society. During the pandemic, the share of remote working Europeans rose from 12% pre-pandemic to 50% mid-pandemic (Galanti et al., 2021), changing the context of RW so drastically that what was previously known could no longer be taken for granted (Chu et al., 2022).

1.1.2 What Is Stress?

Stress as a phenomenon is, in its nature, highly individual (Fink, 2016). Stress triggers the release of hormones such as adrenaline, cortisol, and noradrenaline and affects the working of the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems (Grossi, 2008). Thus, stress is physical and clinical, but also experienced and perceived.

Although the term often has negative connotations, stress is itself harmless and can, on the contrary, lead to enhanced performance both physically and mentally (Crum & Achor, 2013). What is negative, however, is unbalanced stress without sufficient recovery, also known as chronic stress (Aronsson et al., 2012; Crum & Achor, 2013).

Managers are seemingly particularly exposed to mental-health problems. In a survey by Eurofound (2017), 20% of all managers experience anxiety, the highest of all occupations in the study. According to the Swedish Work Environment Authority (2020), high workload and social interplay difficulties are two of the primary risks for work-related stress. They further state that the employer is responsible for a good work environment and must work to prevent work-related stress through organizational measures.

Concludingly, work-related stress is undoubtedly costly on multiple levels of society, not the least for individual organizations. It is thus of unquestionable interest for these organizations to take stress seriously in the workplace. Several studies have been made on the effect RW has on workers (Field & Chan, 2018; Galanti et al., 2021; Kumar et al., 2021; Magnavita et al., 2021), some in the context of pandemic and others prior to this new setting, but *what about the leaders*?

1.2 Research Gap

Literature requests studies from companies without RW experience and for more heterogeneous samples from diverse sectors and countries (Field & Chan, 2018; Vander Elst et al., 2017). In addition, less quantitative self-reporting measures and more qualitative research on underlying mechanisms and processes connected to RW and stress are solicited (Field & Chan, 2018; Magnavita et al., 2021; Nielsen & Miraglia, 2017; Zheng et al., 2021). Skakon et al. (2010) request research on the processes of how leaders' and followers' stress interrelate. Koinig and Diel (2021) want future studies to incorporate the employers' view on the responsibility for employees' health, something that we intend to fill in by studying leaders' stress in RW. Lastly, Field and Chan (2018) call for future qualitative research specifically addressing boundaries and work-life balance in the RW setting.

1.3 Purpose & Research Question

With this study, we aim to examine the effects a RW environment has had on leaders' stress during the pandemic. To the best of our knowledge, little research has been done about stress in the remote workplace from the perspective of the leader, and following the pandemic, the work environment suddenly and drastically shifted to RW (Chu et al., 2022). Therefore, we aim to contribute to the discourse by answering the following research question:

How has leading in a remote work environment affected leaders' perceived stress during the COVID-19 pandemic?

More details regarding the intended impact and the extended purpose of this thesis related to the CIVICA Engage Track can be found in Appendix A.

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2 Literature Review

2.1 Intervention Studies – Improving the Work Environment

Increasing stress levels in the workplace is a trend mainly related to high workloads and other mental health issues (Koinig & Diel, 2021). In order to improve workplace health, including the psychosocial work environment, employers use workplace interventions. Interventions can be categorized on multiple levels according to what they address, but the most common are individual and organizational interventions (Fox et al., 2021; Nielsen et al., 2017; Molek-Winiarska & Molek-Kozakowska., 2020). According to Molek-Winiarska and Molek-Kozakowska (2020), organizational-level interventions address the actual causes of stress and could be a reworking of structures, while individual-level interventions more commonly address existing stress. Examples of interventions are learning interventions (Watson et al., 2018), interventions related to work-life balance (Brough & O'Driscoll, 2010), or more alternative measures, like tracking the heart rate of an employee (Gleason, 2021). Some recommendations for management leadership interventions are improved internal leadership collaboration and increased commitment to and evaluation of interventions for increased impact (Daniels et al., 2017; Molek-Winiarska & Molek-Kozakowska., 2020; Martin et al., 2016; Wu et al., 2021). However, interventions can be challenging to study and evaluate (Martin et al., 2014), and Nielsen and Miraglia (2017) problematize current intervention research for focusing too much on quantitative measures, risking missing the nuances of context and outcomes.

2.2 Beyond Interventions – Remote Work Research

In intervention-research findings suggest that RW and flextime are among the most effective interventions to improve job satisfaction and well-being (Fox et al., 2021; Kröll et al., 2017). However, RW has historically been perceived as atypical and potentially negative for career opportunities (Pfeifer, 2021). Research suggests that managers should ensure good work environments for RW and office work, reflecting RW's changing norms (Field & Chan, 2018; Vander Elst et al., 2017). Field and Chan (2018) also emphasize that leaders should model availability reduction in RW.

2.2.1 RW and Stress

Henke et al. (2016) conclude that a small extent of RW, compared to no RW, may significantly reduce a number of health risks, yet find no significant association between stress and RW. Kröll et al. (2017) claim that medium RW may be optimal for job satisfaction in contrast to no RW or RW only. Yet, Vander Elst et al. (2017) showed that work-related well-being does not depend on the extent of RW but on other factors such as social support, task autonomy, and work-family conflict.

In an Italian quantitative study, just before the pandemic, Magnavita et al. (2021) are concerned about the mental health of telecommuters and argue that "stressors associated with telecommuting can eventually lead to exhaustion and burnout" (Magnavita et al., 2021, p. 2). Spagnoli et al. (2020) mention interruptions, role ambiguity, constant relearning, and multitasking as examples of techno-specific stressors. Ingusci et al. (2021) highlight that technology is a resource that can relieve stress, yet also a risk factor partly due to stress in the implementation of new technology. Moreover, Kumar et al. (2021) found that distress had increased from RW, albeit not distinguishing between COVID-19 and RW-induced stressors; however, the nature of the stressors has complicated such distinctions (Magnavita et al., 2021; Tønnessen et al., 2021).

2.2.2 RW – Differences in Perceptions and Experience

Earlier studies of RW have drawn on institutional theory to investigate managers' differing RW attitudes (Mokhtarian & Bagley, 1998, 2000; Peters & Heusinkvelds, 2010). Mokhtarian and Bagley (2000) explored that managers and employees differ in preferences and perceptions regarding telecommuting. Later studies found that employees and managers differ in desire to work from home (Pfeifer, 2021). Top managers emphasize the professional advantages of working from home and focus more on productivity, while their subordinates emphasize stress reduction and family benefits to a higher degree (Mokhtarian & Bagley, 1998; Peters & Heusinkvelds, 2010).

In a Czech study from the first wave of the pandemic, Pfeifer (2021) found that managers' perception of their mental health indicates that they have been better at adapting to RW than employees, which he suggests is attributable to self-regulation practices learned from day-to-day management experience. Furthermore, while RW experience positively affected workers' psychological well-being when working from home, inexperienced workers struggled despite extra employer support (Pfeifer, 2021). Likewise, Donati et al. (2021) state that RW experience is a resource, stressing the importance of positive attitudes toward technology in learning and how it positively affects perceived stress and well-being.

2.2.3 Work-Life-Balance – Family, Role Ambiguity, and Productivity

As mentioned, RW has been studied in the context of work-life balance. Field and Chan (2018) argue that work and private-life boundaries are disappearing among knowledge workers. They expand on employees' differing work and home roles and how role ambiguity may negatively affect work-life balance. They found that norms had changed to an increased expectancy of availability even before the pandemic and that working overtime seemed normal. This is confirmed by Kumar et al. (2021), who argue that RW and COVID-19 lead to increases in commitments, stress, and decreased performance, in part due to family distractions lowering the quality of work.

Additionally, Galanti et al. (2021) found that distractions, family-work conflict, and social isolations were risks associated with RW, while there also are opportunities for increased job autonomy and self-leadership. Findings also support that work-family conflict could be

relieved by RW (Chu et al., 2022; Field & Chan, 2018). Furthermore, Donati et al. (2021) claim that family has historically been a primary driver of RW integration, highlighting the importance of managerial structures and experience in enabling RW work-life balance. Finally, in a most recent study, Chu et al. (2022) found work-life balance to be a stress reliever in RW, carrying the potential of increasing productivity through happiness.

Tønnessen et al. (2021) state that stress and role ambiguity is negatively related to information sharing and creative performance. Van der Lippe and Lippenyi (2020, p. 64) expand on how "costs of monitoring and coordinating" in RW may affect cooperation and team performance. They also state that the lack of visibility may cause manager ambiguity. Finally, Chu et al. (2022) raise concerns about granting autonomy and exercising supervisor control across RW boundaries.

Two different Italian studies examine leadership styles. Spagnoli et al. (2020) found that authoritarian leadership in RW can increase employees' techno-stress and Magnavita et al. (2021) stress the risks of intrusive leadership dissuading leaders from interfering with subordinates' private lives. Matisane et al. (2021) portray managers' difficulties performing workplace risk assessments in their employees' homes due to individual differences in employees' willingness to provide insight into their private sphere.

2.3 Leaders' Stress and Role

St Hilaire et al. (2019) state that managers experience more stress due to their specific work stressors, such as a lack of social support and higher demands, a view Lovelace et al. (2007) share. They propose that managers are also at risk of having worse social relationships at work and that role conflicts can be more harmful to leaders than followers. In addition, a review by Humphrey et al. (2008) shows that leaders carry an extra load of emotional work by regulating their display of emotions, originating from the demand on their role to inspire and motivate their employees, all while leading by example. Humphrey et al. go on to make a case for emotional contagion and that leaders' mood influences subordinates' mood and that leaders manage the emotions of their subordinates.

Furthermore, leaders regulate the organizational demands facing employees, and leadership is essential in addressing subordinates' health in the workplace (St Hilaire et al., 2019; Watson et al., 2018). St Hilaire et al. (2019) argue that employees' mental health can also be improved by improving managers' mental health while expanding on followers' impact on managers' mental health, switching the perspective to the reciprocal nature of all professional relationships to the work environment. Skakon (2010) shows evidence for and expands on how leaders' stress and well-being are associated with followers' stress and well-being, confirming the case put forth by St Hilaire et al. (2019). He states that leaders influence cultures and organizations in a way that points to stress as contagious (Skakon, 2010). Tønnessen et al. (2021) state that the pandemic made employees seek information and social support from their managers. In line with those findings, Zheng et al. (2021) argue that

followers' demands affect managers' well-being during the pandemic stating that increased responsibility can aggravate well-being due to the costs of tending to employees' needs.

3 Theoretical Framework

3.1 Sensemaking

According to Blomberg (2020), individuals co-produce their reality actively as they try to make sense of themselves, their surroundings, and everything in it. Weick (1995) coined the term *sensemaking* and described it with seven properties: grounded in identity, retrospective, enactive, social, ongoing, based on cues, and driven by plausibility (Blomberg, 2020; Weick, 1995). It can thus be summarized as the act of constructing meaning of the world in and around us and is a widely adopted tool in organization studies (Brown et al., 2015).

3.2 Stress Mindset

In a study by Crum et al. (2013), they introduce their theory Stress Mindset. It is based on the notion of the stress paradox that stress can be both debilitating and enhancing (Crum et al., 2013). In their paper, Crum et al. posit that one's attitude toward stress will affect the effect of stress: having a stress-is-enhancing (SIE) mindset will produce positive effects, and a stress-is-debilitating (SID) will produce negative effects. In addition, they find that one's stress mindset can be altered through priming intervention and is not static. Kaluza et al. (2021) found that leaders' stress mindset will affect the way that they perceive the stress of their subordinates. In another study, Huebschmann and Sheets (2020) found that having an SIE mindset mitigates depressive and anxiety symptoms. Stress Mindset thus lays the foundation of our reasoning that stress is not only an individual phenomenon that is sensemaked from a socially constructed reality but also can be affected by one's mindset.

3.3 Boundary Theory

Boundary theory is a social-constructivist theory relating to different kinds of borders that people create, motivate, maintain, challenge, and defend (Aronsson et al., 2012). In research, it is used in discussions surrounding work-life balance (Ashforth et al., 2000; Field & Chan, 2018; Kreiner et al., 2009). Ashforth et al. (2000) expand it to entail the creation of roles in society, at work, at home, and at "third places" such as the gym or a church. They explain how boundaries are used by dividing things adding structure, and these borders are marked by rites of passage where the crossing activity indicates the switching of roles of the individual (Ashforth et al., 2000). These transitions are often habitually regulated behaviors and can be macro-transitions such as changing life phases and micro-transition between work and home.

Furthermore, they explain how role spheres can merge to differing degrees depending on their permeability and flexibility (Ashforth et al., 2000). Permeability refers to the degree to which the role allows one to be present in another role simultaneously, while flexibility means that the role can be enacted in multiple spheres without a shift occurring (Ashforth et al., 2000). This means that roles can be segmented and integrated, and the greater the

difference between two roles, the greater the magnitude of the transition (Ashforth et al., 2000). Lastly, Ashforth et al. say that roles come with costs and benefits in a trade-off between integration and segmentation and propose that individuals differ in their willingness to let spheres merge, which relates to differences when structuring and ordering their environments.

3.4 The Job-Demand-Control-(Support) Model

Since its conception, the Job Demand-Support model (JDC) by Karasek (1979) has influenced occupational stress research significantly (Van der Doef & Maes, 1999). The model comprises two dimensions: job *demand,* and job *control*, which interact and result in mental strain (Karasek, 1979). Karasek explains job demand as a measurement of workload, which represents the non-physical stressors in the work environment, and job control as a measure of *decision latitude*, which is the extent to which a person can control their conduct and work, sometimes called decision discretion. Job control is further divided into two parts: *decision authority* and *intellectual discretion,* the latter sometimes also referred to as skill discretion (Karasek, 1979; Van der Doef & Maes, 1999). According to the model, it is the combination of low decision latitude and high job demand that results in job strain, i.e., stress (Johnson & Hall, 1988).

JDC was later refined by Johnson & Hall (1988) with an additional third dimension (*social support*) to also include psychosocial aspects in the model, thus called Job Demand-Control-Support (JDCS). The social-support dimension is defined as "worksite social integration" and refers to socializing with peers in the workplace (Van der Doef & Maes, 1999, p. 89; Johnson & Hall, 1988). When analyzing the findings, support emerged as a theme, however, not in the sense as described in JDC(S), but rather as the giving and receiving of support between superiors and subordinates. For that reason, the JDC(S) model has been excluded, and focus is instead solely on JDC.

According to Van der Doef & Maes (1999), research on JDC has historically had two distinct hypotheses: *strain* hypothesis and *buffer* hypothesis. The first hypothesis is that demand and control have additive effects that lead to high *strain*, while the other pose that demands and control have interactive effects, in which control functions as a moderator that *buffer* the adverse effects of demand (Van der Doef & Maes, 1999). In their review, Van der Doef & Maes (1999) concludes that the strain hypothesis has considerable support, while the buffer hypothesis has been less studied, hence having less conclusive support (Aronsson et al., 2012). Nevertheless, one reason could be because of the subjective nature of the model. For instance, evidence suggests that personality may significantly influence whether one will benefit from more control or not (Van der Doef & Maes, 1999). Therefore, the model still stands as a solid theoretical lens through which stress can be studied. Moreover, the model fits the context of the research question well since the pandemic imposed significant changes to the work environment that would alter both demand and control for the leaders.

3.5 Job-Demand-Resources-Model

Another extension of the JDC model is the Job-Demand-Resources (JDR) model developed by Bakker and Demerouti (2006). It combines the JDC model with the Effort Reward Imbalance (ERI) model, which uses concepts of motivation to display how a psychological contract demands a balance between efforts and reward, whereas stress appears in the imbalance between the two (Bakker & Demerouti, 2006). In this model, extrinsic and intrinsic motivation related to rewards is what makes one cope with the stressors (Aronsson et al., 2012). Bakker and Demerouti (2006) argue that the two models are too simple and generic since many things can be labeled as demands, control, or rewards. They furthermore state that a combining of the models would increase their applicability. Combining the models, control, support, demand, and the strain and buffer hypothesis are kept, along with the reward and motivation mechanisms, as a balancing force called resources.

The model is comprehensive and shows some processes, yet one can argue that Bakker and Demerouti (2006) are guilty of the same mistakes they criticize previous models for committing. They make it even less specific by lumping already broad concepts into the broader still concept of resources. However, this trade-off is difficult to avoid, and the breadth of the model makes it more widely applicable. The concept of relievers in our model (see Figure 2) displays factors with a similar function and intuition as resources in the JDR model. Despite the model being used in contemporary research, such as Ingusci et al. (2021), and evidence pointing in the direction of JDR, the motivation part will not be included in this study; partly due to the limits set by our course director regarding motivation theories but also due to the JDC model being suitable and sufficient to use for the analysis of the findings.

4 Methodology

4.1 Research Setting

4.1.1 Stressmottagningen

This study is written in partnership with Stressmottagningen, a private specialist care unit in Stockholm with expertise in exhaustion disorder and other stress-related health problems. The organization started as a research unit in 2000 and has since grown to work both preventively and with care and rehab (Stressmottagningen, 2020). Given the Stressmottagningen's background, the partnership nudged the study into a predominantly clinical perspective of stress in its early phase, as they provided us with surveys for inspiration (see Appendix B). Since these suited a quantitative approach and the literature review revealed a lack of qualitative studies, a mixed-method was initially pursued. However, after discussions with our supervisor, we concluded that a mixed-method would be too intricate given the scope of the study. In addition, because stress in its clinical aspect is considered health data and thus sensitive information, a qualitative study was deemed the optimal approach for reasons covered in Chapter 4.2.

4.1.2 Research Strategy

The aim of this study strikes the convergence of two significant research gaps: (1) the context of RW dramatically changing as the pandemic hit the world, and (2) little existing research on stress from leaders' perspective. In light of this gap, a combined exploratory and explanatory design was chosen to contribute to a baseline for future, more in-depth research. At the onset of the research process, the intention was to do an inductive study. However, the material obtained from Stressmottagningen provided an early theoretical framework. Albeit not substantial enough to compose a sheer deductive study, it was enough to constitute the study's preliminary theoretical framework from which theory could be further developed as the study evolved, thus, making the study abductive.

At first, a case study was considered; however, the ambition was to make the result as generalizable as possible to achieve the greatest possible contribution because of the limited previous research on the topic. Stress from RW would likely be influenced by many different factors specific to the census's industry, organization, team, or individual; hence, singling out a specific case would make the result ill-suited to explain the phenomenon in general. Therefore, a cross-sectional study was chosen to obtain a diversified and more holistic view of the phenomenon and a more generalizable result.

4.2 Measuring Stress

To provide a conceptual overview, we divided it into two perspectives: (a) the perceived and (b) the clinical. The perceived perspective of stress is about how people view and relate to it: their personal definition and understanding of it and attitude towards it, i.e., their subjective comprehension of stress. On the other hand, the clinical perspective regards the physiological functions of stress, hence, comprising both personal and sensitive data. Therefore, to ensure an ethical study and avoid sensitive data while still capturing the individual and social nuances of stress, the study focused on the subjects' perception of stress instead, using an interpretive approach. By designing the study with questions that required participants to reflect on stress and thereby capture their subjectively constructed view and sensemaking of the phenomenon, stressors in the RW environment and the effects of stress being present could be discerned as a measure of their perceived stress (see Figure 1). Concludingly, a qualitative cross-sectional study with an interpretivist philosophy was chosen.

Figure 1: Illustration of how perceived stress can be measured through participants' self-reflection on stress.
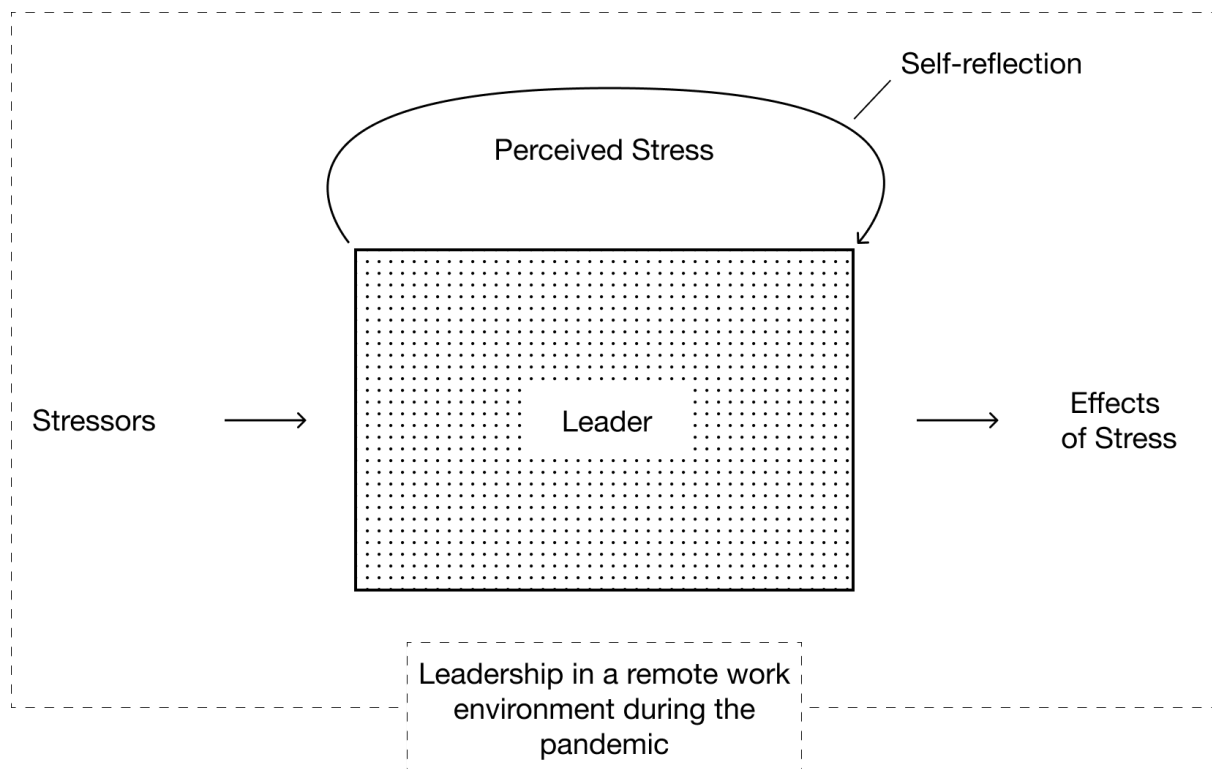
4.3 Sampling Method

Data were collected using purposive heterogeneous sampling. The goal was to get a diversified sample with an even gender distribution from various industries with different stereotypical characteristics to illuminate key themes (Saunders et al., 2019). A relatively simple bipartite selection criteria were developed: (1) the participant had to be a leader, which

we defined as someone who has the managerial responsibility of a minimum of three employees (henceforth called subordinates), and (2) either or both parties—the leader or the subordinates—had to have worked from home for an extensive (>50%) part of the pandemic. Time constraints and difficulties in finding willing participants forced us to resolve to some level of convenience sampling for two of the interviews, where we utilized our private network to attain a sufficient sample size; hence a couple of the interviewees were people we knew beforehand.

4.4 Data Collection

The interviews were held two-to-one, adopting investigator triangulation, with one interviewer, one interviewee, and a notetaker that could join in with follow-up questions when appropriate (Saunders et al., 2019). Interviews were conducted with 16 participants, of which one (interview 5) has been excluded due to the participant not meeting the selection criteria, which was not discovered until mid-interview. Saturation was reached after 11 of 16 interviews, after which no new themes appeared. Interviewees represent seven different companies in a diverse number of industries: retail, transport, IT, engineering, food manufacturing, and the public sector. At most four participants represented the same company (company B and F), two participants each represented company A and E, and the rest were represented by a single participant (see Table 1). 56.25% of the participants identified as male, and 43.75% as female. The interviews ranged from just below 36 minutes to just above 74 minutes in length, averaging approximately 51 minutes per interview. Fourteen interviews were conducted digitally over a Microsoft Teams video call; the remaining two were conducted at the participants' office at their request.

4.4.1 Semi-Structured Interviews

All data were gathered within a two-week time frame through semi-structured interviews beginning at the end of March, two years past the pandemic outbreak in Sweden. An interview guide was developed beforehand with themes and questions adapted from the material Stressmottagningen had provided (see Appendix B). Before beginning the interview process, the interview guide was reviewed by Stressmottagningen to ensure the correct use of their material and general objectivity.

Prior to each interview, an email with an information sheet and a participation consent form was sent out to the participant. Each interview was structured into four parts, inspired by Saunders' et al. (2019) approach to questioning: (1) introduction, (2) general data, (3) main part, and (4) ending. The first two parts of the interview had a more rigid structure, and as the interview advanced to the main part, the structure loosened. Before starting the interview, short small talk was held to build rapport and lay a foundation of trust with the participant (Saunders et al., 2019). In (1) the introduction the background and purpose of the study were covered as mentioned in the information sheet, as well as the information about their rights, such as confidentiality and anonymity. The introduction was ensued by ten shorter questions covering (2) general data that we wanted to establish for all participants. In (3) the main part,

the interview followed a semi-structured format with occasional probing questions, and (4) ended with a question of whether there was anything the participant wanted to mention that we had not already covered as well as once again thanking them for participating.

4.4.2 Template Analysis

Every interview was recorded and organized into sections based on the company it represented (Table 1) and thereafter transcribed. After transcription, each interview was coded with in vivo codes, using the themes found in the interview guide as the outlining a priori template (see Appendix C). The template was then revised continuously as new themes and groupings emerged.

Table 1: List of interviews.

Interview	Duration	Company	Interviewer
1	54:53	A	Samuel
2	49:59	A	Samuel
3	38:02	B	Mattias
4	55:14	B	Mattias
~~5~~	~~38:19~~	~~B~~	~~Samuel~~
6	52:06	B	Samuel
7	39:53	C	Mattias
8	46:53	D	Mattias
9	41:22	E	Samuel
10	35:53	E	Samuel
11	49:44	F	Mattias
12	01:14:07	G	Mattias
13	57:03	F	Samuel
14	51:06	F	Samuel
15	01:02:31	F	Mattias
16	01:09:15	H	Mattias

4.5 Methodological Discussion

4.5.1 Ethical Considerations

We have taken measures to avoid the collection of sensitive personal data through the design of our questions. By opting for a qualitative study and not using diagnostic questionnaires

like those provided by Stressmottagningen, questions on sensitive personal data could be rephrased or avoided altogether. In those cases where participants deliberately shared sensitive information in a way we could not control, it was erased and not taken into account.

4.5.2 Trustworthiness

4.5.2.1 Dependability

Given that this is a cross-sectional study, there is a distance between the time of the interview and the time of the perceived stress we are examining that might affect participants' answers as they are dependent on their memories. To mitigate this, we clearly communicated to the participants continually throughout the interviews the setting as delimited to leadership in a remote work environment *during* the pandemic, with the intention of reminding them of the time frame of interest. Moreover, as mentioned in Chapter 3.3, two of the participants were known beforehand, thereby potentially affecting their answers with response bias and our interpretation of their answers through interviewer bias. However, worth mentioning is that since saturation was reached after 11 interviews, the two interviews did not solely provide any themes that were not also found in the other 14 interviews. Regardless, the lack of standardization in semi-structured interviews lowers the study's dependability.

4.5.2.2 Credibility

To ensure credibility, we used Saunders' et al. (2019) template for opening a semi-structured interview to build rapport and trust with the participant. Furthermore, investigator triangulation was adopted, and all interviews were recorded and then transcribed into text (Saunders, 2019; Bryman & Bell, 2011). On those occasions where we were hesitant about what was actually meant by a statement, the participant in question was contacted again to confirm or clarify the data. Hence, the credibility of the study is high.

4.5.2.3 Confirmability

Since this study is conducted with an interpretivist research philosophy, its confirmability is limited to our ability to interpret our findings. Although attempts at ensuring confirmability have been made, such as investigator triangulation, potential bias is yet likely to exist and hence lowering the confirmability.

4.5.2.4 Transferability

Since this is a combined exploratory and explanatory study, the intention has been to make the findings as generalizable as possible, albeit not statistically (Saunders et al., 2019). To improve the study's transferability the context of the study, research design, and findings has been described as extensively as possible. Moreover, by designing the interview guide based on existing diagnostic questionnaires, the transferability is somewhat strengthened. However, the actual transferability of the study must be left to future research on this topic to decide.

5 Empirics

5.1 Three Roots

As the pandemic hit and brought quarantines and a new type of remote work, the consequences were innumerable. The empirical material revealed three roots to a series of consequences. What became apparent over the interviews was that a negative consequence for some was a positive change for others. This dichotomous nature is found in many of the identified themes. These themes will be presented in this chapter, laying the foundation for the subsequent analysis.

5.1.1 Being Home

The most significant difference between work as it was before the pandemic and the new setting that came with the pandemic is found in the environmental setting of the study, namely the home. Working remotely from home forced the leaders to abandon many of their routines, systems, and previous working methods. Not only did it blur the lines between work and private life as it penetrated the integrity of the home, but it forced new technological systems to be adopted, which is the second root.

5.1.2 Technology

Few organizations had sufficient digital infrastructure to handle this new setting, and many new tools and software had to be adopted swiftly. Some leaders claimed that technological issues were a challenge causing much frustration, and many said they had better conditions at the office, albeit improving conditions at home over time. Technology is connected to multiple consequences, such as communication, creative work and collaboration, and productivity.

5.1.3 Being A Leader: The Responsibility–Expectations Loop

The third root comes with the role of being a leader. With leadership comes responsibilities, and coupled with one's own and others' expectations, these responsibilities can expand. In RW, expectations of increased availability increased workload, causing work-family conflict, among other things. Below, some of these themes will be laid out in greater detail, beginning with communication.

5.2 Communication

5.2.1 The Coffee Talk

As companies reoriented themselves in this new setting, new digital infrastructures were introduced, and work was soon back to speed. However, the new tools and work environment gave rise to a new way of communicating. In some ways, communication was impaired, and

in others, improved. Overall, many realized the importance of communication to their leadership, and all leaders claimed communication challenges in RW.

One of the greatest challenges pertains to the non-verbal aspect of communication in digital meetings and the lack of informal physical interaction in the office. A widely appreciated phenomenon reappearing continuously was what many called "coffee talk": the spontaneous chats with coworkers throughout the day, in the hallway, or next to the coffee machine. Body language and social cues are essential aspects of communication that the leaders use to gauge the status of their subordinates, something which the majority of the leaders felt was lost in digital meetings. This loss of non-verbal communication has increased the need for clearer and more structured communication, better listening, and interpreting, increasing the leaders' responsibilities and expectations. One leader expressed how it made it "hard to care for employees in the way that you want", believing employees say they do fine out of politeness. Another manager had an occasion of employee burnout in his workgroup and claimed not getting the cues in time to intervene.

"...it has been difficult to lead in the digital format. I have not managed to create good enough flow of conversations. [...] I do not see their body language. And the worst is when I have people turning off the camera. Then I don't even know if they are in the conversation anymore."

– Interview 4

"[...] communication failures that occur and misinterpretations and other people's interpretation of the same things. And so that I would say was the biggest challenge."

– Interview 3

5.2.2 Leadership Style

Multiple leaders mention that their leadership has been affected by the remote and digital setting. Most of these accounts state that it is challenging to lead remotely, for some leading to feelings of insufficiency, awkwardness, or inadequacy relating to their leadership. This was especially true for leaders stating that their leadership builds on social interaction and relationships. Not being able to lead in their preferred way has forced them to adapt and "learn to lead relationally remote" (Interview 3). While learning has occurred, many leaders express the lack of social interaction as dull.

"My leadership builds on the direct physical contact with people"

– Interview 2

5.2.3 The Difficulty of Agile and Creative Work

While the quality of meetings has deteriorated, RW has also caused a shift towards more one-way communication, increasing the number of meetings to make up for the lost informal

communication. In turn, it led to longer workdays due to the nature of managerial work. Some reported stress from feeling that these meetings were unnecessary since they would be replaced by coffee talk in the usual circumstances. Others appreciated the fact that it was easier to get in contact with subordinates.

"But I could, basically, reach people better, although, it's not this coffee talk."

– Interview 6

Moreover, communication in RW has made leading creative and agile work in teams difficult, resulting in a perceived decreased quality of the output. This has been the case both for homogenous teams and diverse cross-functional teams with expertise from different professions in complex tasks. These inefficiencies in planning and leading agile work have been a cause of both stress and frustration for leaders. In addition, some leaders expressed a lack of structure in digital meetings as well as in workflows and availability.

"Sometimes you need a whiteboard to illustrate and then there are limitations to the tool [Microsoft Teams] that you can't escape."

– Interview 2

"20 people in a [Microsoft] Teams meeting who should all think the same [...] then you notice like this that, it is not as effective, it is difficult."

– Interview 16

5.2.4 Tough Conversations

Lastly, delivering and receiving emotionally loaded information has become even more challenging due to the above-mentioned aspects. In these kinds of conversations, the leaders are all the more dependent on the subtleties and nuances in communication that are lost digitally. In multiple cases, conflict management and giving constructive criticism have been postponed, giving rise to different sorts of subsequent challenges.

5.3 Work-Life Balance

As mentioned, working from home blurred the lines between work and private life and challenged the leaders' work-life balance. However, in this theme, the subjective nature of the consequences was noticeable. Several leaders claimed it had not affected them much; some mentioned the positive effects, such as better focus, fewer distractions, and easier to switch between work and private life, as examples of an improved work-life balance.

"From having traveled 120 days a year and maybe not always seeing each other that often, you suddenly had time for the family in a different way."

– Interview 16

Yet, the majority reported work-life balance as worse and in some cases severely affected by RW.

"When workplace and home blurs together it becomes 'neither nor', so surely, recuperation is worse [...] everything was a mess when you were awake."

– Interview 3

5.3.1 Availability

With these blurred lines, both expected and actual availability increased. Having the computer so readily available made it difficult for many to stop working when the workday was over, and since everyone was in the same boat, the expectation of being available increased collectively.

"You work a lot when the computer always stands there [in the home]. [...] I don't have a problem with that, but I realized that my spouse is home too and what worked well was that we could eat lunch and take walks together."

– Interview 16

5.3.2 Work-Family Conflict

When it comes to family, some leaders state that the presence of small children in the remote work environment was a distraction and stressful. However, one leader stated that the presence of children was supportive, reducing loneliness in RW, and provided some structure to the day. In addition, working from home with children being ill was common for some leaders, handling it with varying degrees of success.

"I can't turn off and be too strict [with my family] either [...] I simply have a better work environment in my office than I have at home, it's less distracted by family issues"

– Interview 15

5.3.3 Workload

The overall workload increased in some way for almost all leaders. However, productivity levels depended on the leaders' tasks and context. Some leaders stated that some tasks fit better for remote work than others, and some said RW had enhanced their productivity and focus, while others claimed the opposite. The overall perception of the interviewees' accounts is that repetitive and routine tasks worked well in RW, while non-routine and collaborative tasks did less so.

"We cannot perform as well as in a physical room [...] it's difficult to accept a lower level of what we want to achieve."

– Interview 2

"The company doesn't work as well if we work remote as when people are in the office"

"On a positive note, I have been able to focus in a whole other way with my own work tasks […] not interrupted in the same way."

Most leaders are proud of their accomplishments during the period, but some report having had to work "twice as hard", "3-5 hours longer work day", and had a sense that productivity periodically went down. In turn, this led to frustration and stress over performance, not meeting one's expectations, and struggling to accept the lower quality of output. Meanwhile, others could see how RW improved work capability after acclimatizing to the new situation.

"...when you had acclimatized to this situation, I realized I can manage a lot more work when I work from home"

5.3.4 Taking a Break

Many leaders state that they lacked pauses and breaks, and some had difficulty getting started in the morning. Breaks have a physical, social, and mental function and are a source of productivity in terms of informal work discussions.

Some managers state that working from home robbed them of a regular change of environment, while others were able to cope without a home office by switching rooms in the house. An example of this was the de-stressing effect of commuting, expressed as a ritual marking where work starts and the home ends, providing a transition space for the mind to shift to and from work. Instead, this time was mostly spent working, making the workday longer. Nevertheless, the lack of commute was not solely negatively portrayed. One leader felt relief over the time saved when not having to drive in a stressful rush hour.

"It's what's good about it […] not having to sit and go through rush hour as an additional stressor to an already stressful job."

5.4 Responsibility and Support

5.4.1 Giving Support To Subordinates

An example of how responsibilities and expectations connected to leadership have put extra weight on the leaders is the difficulties in showing support to one's subordinates. Especially since subordinates' work environment is the managers' responsibility in Sweden, many leaders expressed frustration over the lack of perception and influence of subordinates' work environment and well-being, some even stating subordinate responsibility was stressful entirely. There was, for instance, concern about whether subordinates' homes were suited for work, particularly for new and young employees with less experience and finances.

"I can't […] send home computers, screens, chairs and tables. Those things can make me stressed"

– Interview 2

While some managers performed regular individual or group check-in to track subordinate well-being, not all subordinates appreciated or received that support; thus, they needed to show a lot of individual consideration. Moreover, the lack of visibility of employees has been an issue for some leaders, stating a loss of control. All leaders did not proactively reach out to their employees, and some leaders felt regret and disappointment with themselves for not doing so, even stating that not reaching out was stress-inducing. In contrast, one leader's perception was that employees projected their worries, stress, and uncertainty onto her, asking questions about the pandemic. This was a challenge when no answers were to be found.

"We are not a mental health club like here, but we are actually a workplace and somewhere there's a limit of what I can handle of your private problems since we have a professional relationship. […] it became even a little more obscure and blurred and borderless…"

– Interview 10

5.4.2 Receiving Support From Superiors

While supporting their subordinates was a stressor, insufficient support from superiors could also be stressful. To some extent, the organizational culture sets the standard for the support climate for both giving and receiving support. Due to the participants being leaders themselves, many showed understanding for their superiors' situation when they showed a lack of support. There was also the notion that a higher hierarchical position entails greater responsibility for one's work environment. Nevertheless, accounts of the support received from superiors varied. Some were very content with the support they received, while others felt neglected.

"Maybe I would have received more support if I'd requested it […] He might care more about how I care for my subordinates than about me and my manager colleagues"

– Interview 1

*"…[workload] was extremely high and I don't think there was any understanding [from the superior]"*

– Interview 7

5.5 Categorizing the Findings

All themes mentioned above can be divided into two categories: *stressors* and *relievers*. Stressors represent the things that increase stress, and relievers represent the things that reduce stress. Together they have a dichotomous impact on leaders' perceived stress that

nullifies stress when balanced, meaning that neither stressors nor relievers are harmful or beneficial per se, but when imbalanced, they can affect perceived stress negatively or positively (Figure 2). Additionally, both stressors and relievers have internal and external aspects. While the type of stressor (internal or external) is insignificant to its impact on stress, the type of reliever has significant meaning on its impact, which will be explained further in Chapter 6.1.

Figure 2: Illustration of the balancing relationship between *stressors* and *relievers* and their impact on leaders' perceived stress.
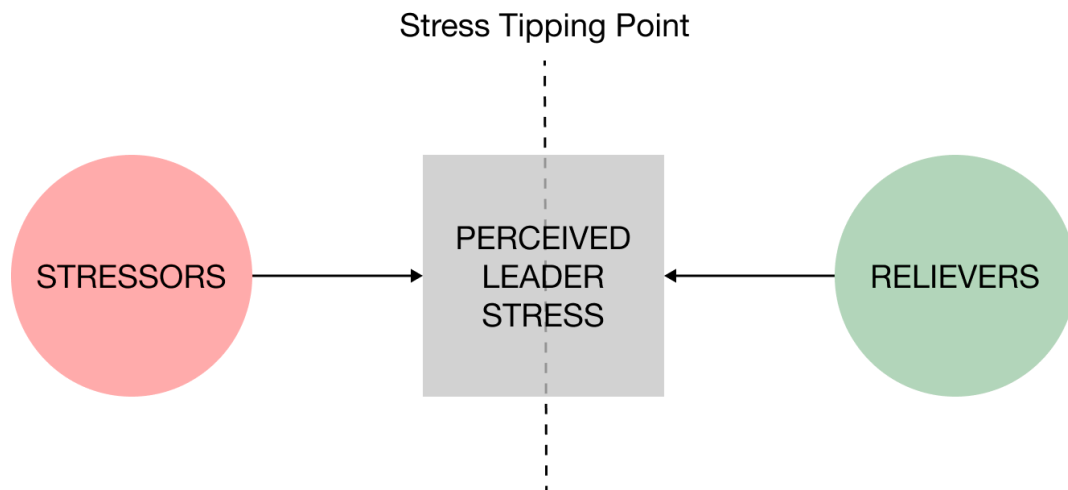
Table 2: Overview of the categorization of themes into internal and external stressors and relievers, respectively.

	Stressors (job demand)	Relievers (job control)

Internal	Personality
	Own expectations
		Personality
		Experience
		Structure
		    Discipline
		    Communicating
		    Boundaries

External	Being home
	    Family-work conflict
	    Availability
	Technological difficulties
	    Impaired communication
	    Creative work difficult
	Responsibility
	    Others' expectations
	    Workload
	Ambiguity
	    Superiors' expectations
	    Role ambiguity
		Superiors' support
		Organizational culture

6 Analysis

6.1 JDC Applied

The consensus of the JDC model from a buffer hypothesis perspective (Van der Doef & Maes, 1999; Karasek, 1979) is that demand and control have an interactive relationship, where control moderates the effects of stress. Demand and control are reflected by what we have defined in this study as stressors and relievers, respectively. Control can be divided into two aspects the same way stressors and relievers are divided, where external relievers correspond to what we call *available control* and internal relievers to *realized control* (Figure 3). *Available control* is thus the outer perimeter of the possible control one can exert and is delimited by the external environment (e.g., the organizational culture or one's superiors). *Realized control*, on the other hand, is the extent to which a leader utilizes the *available control* and is thus delimited by internal factors.

Figure 3: Illustration of *realized control* and *available control* as internal and external relievers in the JDC model.
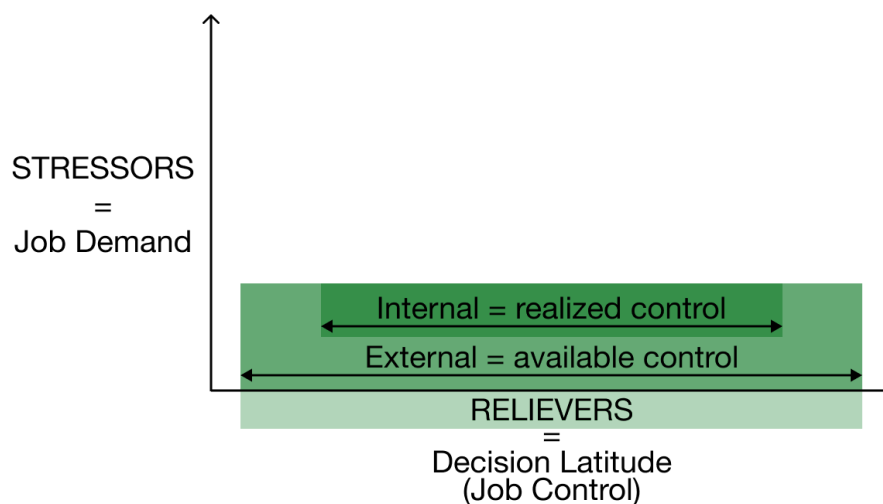
An example of this dynamic is found in Interview 7. A conflict with the leader's superiors arose when they did not like the leader's communication style. The superiors clearly expressed this to the leader, thereby restricting the leader's *available control*. As a result, the leader clearly expressed dissatisfaction with the situation and how it made communication the most challenging part of leadership during the pandemic, ultimately signaling increased perceived stress.

"Yes, I think I was more transparent, but that… The boss wants you to speak a manager's language and be a little, keep employees out of certain topics of conversation and there, I think… They thought I was wrong, but I thought I was right."

– Interview 7

Although an organization's top management sets the outer boundaries of lower-level leaders' decision latitude, these boundaries are often far broader than what many leaders seem to utilize. It often seems like leaders delimit their own discretion, not utilizing it to its full extent, exemplified by juxtaposing interviews 11 and 12. I11 is unhappy with multiple shortcomings in the organization, some of which are a lack of discipline in his team, not hearing from his superiors as often as preferred, and that he cannot have as many breaks as he needs. Instead of utilizing his decision latitude as a leader and taking charge of these problems himself, he puts the responsibility on the organization. All of these are things he has the mandate to control. For instance, he could easily enforce the level of discipline he desires on his subordinates instead of letting things be, he could contact his superiors himself instead of waiting for them to contact him, and he could take control over his schedule to find room for more breaks. In contrast, I12 displays a high degree of control resourcefulness as she regularly takes charge of situations when necessary. For instance, regardless of the level of available control she has at work, she discerns what she has control over in her private life (e.g., discipline and routines) and uses that to increase her overall *realized control* to mitigate stress.

While there seems to be a dimension to the *realized control* in the possibility to extend it to some degree, independent of the *available control*—as I12 did by increasing control in her private life—a second dimension can be uncovered. Although the external environment sets the outer boundaries for one's decision discretion, the individual defines the level of *realized control* based on one's constructed understanding and sensemaking of it (Blomberg, 2020; Weick, 1995). Moreover, since the individual is an active co-creator of itself, others, and the world around it (Blomberg, 2020; Weick, 1995), the level of available control is actually not in the hands of the external environment but the hands of the individual, ultimately emancipating it from the social structures surrounding it, while in the same breath imprisoning it to the self. Just as stress is highly individual, control is not only individual but also subjective.

Along these lines, as already mentioned, there were often stark contrasts between the leaders' accounts. What some experienced stress-inducing or debilitating in their work, others felt as relieving or enhancing. Although not measured or asked about, noticeable differences in personality, mindset, and attitudes seemed to correlate with such differences. For instance, those showing signs of high conscientiousness often expressed themselves less negatively affected by the stress, and vice-versa for those showing signs of higher neuroticism. We also reflected on the extraversion of some leaders and how it connected to their feelings of loneliness.

In addition, many managers claim that their ability to cope with stress has improved with experience, both in terms of age and leadership experience, as well as RW experience. Many who had no previous RW experience reported how initial stress from inexperience decreased as they were sent home during the second wave. One example is one leader who learned to communicate in digital meetings by relying more on the voice and less on body language. Overall, the leaders' teams' collaboration and work adapted to function better in a digital

setting. This points to the measure of experience, and mature self-reflection, to be related to the exercising of realized control in RW, ultimately mitigating stress.

6.2 Blurred Boundaries – Engaging the Context

A theme observed between the lines in the interviews was the blurring of boundaries and their continual renegotiations during the past two years. This includes boundaries of space and time pertaining to rites of passage, such as commute or morning routines in the home (Ashforth et al., 2000). In addition, there has been a renegotiation of social boundaries relating to the constructs of the home and work spheres and their corresponding roles. This is in terms of the borders of workplace responsibility, employee commitment, and availability expectations. These blurred boundaries affect both the professional and social dimensions of workplaces and homes.

Regulating and monitoring tasks are associated with a manager's role (van der Lippe & Lippenyi, 2020). Promoting productivity and workplace health by structuring and regulating visibility of work, availability, and collaboration has constituted a serious challenge to managers in RW. Subordinates were caught performing non-work tasks during working hours, reducing leaders' confidence in subordinates' commitment:

"Are you at ICA [the grocery store] again!? You're supposed to work"

– Interview 14

Leaders' ability to structure their work and private life was a common denominator among those expressing less stress and better success in RW. One such strategy was setting boundaries by marking oneself as busy in Microsoft Teams to cope with high demand. One leader, in particular, implemented the forced use of cameras in meetings to improve communication. Was this an example of intrusive leadership or simply a way of ensuring a productive and healthy work environment? The blurred boundaries make these questions complex to answer.

Another challenge relating to the role of managers is work environment health responsibilities, a domain where many leaders felt inadequate. One example was how one leader introduced daily structured morning meetings to meet his employees and monitor their well-being. Another leader mentioned that he did not do this as a shortcoming. A third leader used less structure and had no meeting guidelines, yet was able to use trust as a strategy to maintain relational leadership in RW. While bearing high demands, he also offered a high level of personal consideration by using his role as manager to support his team members and let them take time off work without reporting it. At the financial expense of his own company, he enabled himself to meet his demands while protecting his own and subordinates' work-life balance.

According to role theory and our literature review, role ambiguity is a cause of stress (Field & Chan, 2018). In our interviews, we observed how leaders were unsure of the boundaries of their RW environment responsibility. This constitutes a challenge for the leader in terms of

the borders of their responsibility and what resources in terms of decision latitude or finances are at their disposal.

"...you're responsible without a budget. Which I feel doesn't really add up."

– Interview 14

Since responsibility can be connected both to control and demand (Johnson & Hall, 1988), it makes the effect of an increase in responsibility ambiguous. In other words, both demand ambiguity and control ambiguity is at play when it comes to RW boundaries, and evidently, some managers navigate, act, and gain control in these situations without asking permission. Managers with more perceived stress issues, on the other hand, had more passive attitudes and mindsets regarding their own demands and perceived control.

7 Discussion

Our findings are in line with the findings of our literature review on RW. However, since our research is placed in a specific gap of leaders' stress in RW, all findings relating to existing literature are not independently essential to the answering of our research question. For instance, our study confirms the importance of experience of RW to thrive in RW, consistent with the findings of Pfeifer et al. (2021). Additionally, we can confirm that stress and role ambiguity from RW in creative work have inhibited performance (Tønnessen et al., 2021). The findings are not unambiguously pointing in one direction but rather to multiple stressors and relievers, of which many can be recognized in the literature. That being said, our findings point to significant challenges of leading in RW affecting the interviewed leaders' perceived stress in significant ways, much like earlier studies of technostress.

When the leaders were asked how they viewed the future, many wondered to what extent RW should be implemented henceforth. Most agreed with hybridity being the way forward, yet some were puzzled about how to get people to go back to the office again. One leader reflected on the "risk of working at too high a pace even after the crisis" (Interview 4). In hindsight, another leader said it was "too easy to set up Teams-meetings," stating she "wanted to have failed earlier" (Interview 10) but that technology somehow enabled the work to go on with too much stress. Apparently, leaders can feel helpless as the forces of digitalization transform the social and professional dimensions of both workplaces and homes.

Nevertheless, might there be a deceptive nature to the flexibility of RW from a critical standpoint? Field and Chan (2018, p. 8) express the double-sided nature of flexible work: "This brings unprecedented empowerment—yet, simultaneously, enslavement". Perhaps, modern knowledge work can be compared to the assembly lines of early Taylorism and the effective bureaucracy (Blomberg, 2019). The assembly line has been exchanged for a laptop, but work nevertheless needs to be delivered. Through a critical lens, increased formal decision latitude could give a false sense of control, as it could prove detrimental to employees unable to handle the RW freedom, a concern shared by one of the interviewed leaders. Implementing RW may give an illusory perception of increased freedom and autonomy. In this way, focus may be removed from the organizations' lack of commitment to health interventions, in line with the reasoning behind Burawoy's labor process theory (Blomberg, 2020; Burawoy, 1979).

Although RW may sometimes be an enabler of work-life balance, we would agree with Field and Chan's (2018) evaluation of the risks connected to the renegotiating of work-life boundaries. A boundary challenge remains regarding managers' use of role authority to accept responsibility in RW and supervise employees without trespassing home boundaries (Magnavita et al., 2021; Matisane et al., 2021).

8 Conclusion

8.1 Answering the Research Question

This study aimed to contribute to research on stress and RW from leaders' perspective by answering the following research question:

How has leading in a remote work environment affected leaders' perceived stress during the pandemic?

First of all, the pandemic has had a significant impact on leaders' perceived stress the same way it had on ordinary workers. However, the effect has been exceedingly individual due to differences in personality, stress mindset, and self-leadership. The findings conclude that there is no one way to describe the effect of RW on leaders' perceived stress. Because the leaders themselves construct stressors and relievers, what constitutes a stressor to one, might be a reliever to another. Second, leaders' perceived stress has been affected by a stifling increase in demands connected to leading in a RW environment. Third, leaders' perceived stress has been affected by their ability or inability to relieve stress by exercising realized control in their private and work lives alike. Ultimately, control is the key to balancing high demands, and the leaders' level of control is determined by themselves through sensemaking.

8.2 Contribution and Practical Implications

Given the answer to the research question, we cannot understate the importance of employers to reflect on the pandemic and RW in a nuanced way without naively embracing it or rejecting it solely due to possible pandemic connotations or change inertia. Furthermore, contextual factors such as industry differences and the actual design of work tasks should be considered (Ingusci et al., 2021).

Finally, on a speculative note, the results of this study could be applied directly by organizations that will keep RW post-pandemic to educate their personnel and leaders about the importance of control and enlighten them about their power in affecting their realized control. Finally, this study contributes to the field of research on boundaries and work-life balance in RW. RW is not for every company or even every individual, but it has the potential to improve work-life balance amidst its many challenges.

8.3 Limitations

This study was cross-sectional and focused on the two years that have passed since the pandemic hit in 2020. It is impossible to unequivocally differentiate the effects of the pandemic alone and that of RW, thus constituting a major limitation to the study. Further, the study was limited to a qualitative single method where clinical stress was not measured. Instead, the participants' perceived stress was measured to avoid collecting any sensitive personal data. By doing so, possible bias, dishonesty, or the withholding of information by

the participants' answers may subsist. Additionally, despite having every intention of answering truthfully and exhaustively, the wide cross-sectional time frame is likely to have impoverished participants' memories, thereby limiting the trustworthiness of the study. For more on limitations, see Chapter 4.5.

8.4 Areas for Future Research

We found differences in leaders' perception of stress concerning work environment responsibility. We deem this an important area for future research. Likewise, perfectionism may be an internal stressor in RW, not least for highly agreeable managers (Parent-Lamarche, 2021). We suggest future research focus on gender differences in RW stress, not least related to work-family conflict. In addition, we find the impact of age in technology adaptation for RW worthy of more research as well as the impact of RW on leaders' stress in the public sector and other leadership settings. Lastly, we call for research on stress in the hybrid and international setting, in line with the trends of digitalization and globalization.

Appendix A: CIVICA Engage Track

This thesis is a CIVICA Thesis which is an European project started by the EU commission, where Stockholm School of Economics collaborate together with several other European Universities. The theme is civic engagement and for this thesis this entails four criteria:

1. Engagement with external partner
2. Topic relevant to society
3. Topic related to European Challenge
4. A project component

(1) As for our external partner we chose to engage in a collaboration with Stressmottagningen, They are a private specialist care unit in Stockholm with expertise in exhaustion disorder and other stress-related health problems. Starting as a research unit on these topics in 2020 they have grown to work both preventively, as well as with care and rehab (Stressmottagningen, 2020)

(2) Stress can lead to burnout with severe costs for the individual and the collective (Fink, 2016). As a societal problem, stress accounts for half of all comorbidities within the group of psychiatric diagnoses in Sweden (Försäkringskassan, 2017). In 2020, costs on mental health problems amounted to 26.5 BSEK in Sweden alone (Skandia, 2020), and costs American business an estimated cost of $300 billion a year (Fink, 2016).

(3) In the EU, stress is one of the most frequently mentioned work-related health problems (28%), second only to musculoskeletal complaints (30%), and more than half of workers report work-related stress to be common in the workplace (European Agency for Safety and Health at Work [EASHW], 2000; 2013). Furthermore, it is estimated that around half of all lost working days can be attributed to work stress (EASHW, 2000).

(4) Stressmottagningen representatives are invited to attend the opposition and the results of this thesis will be shared, at least internally, at Stressmottagningen and possibly through the rewriting of an article addressing leaders' remote work stress.

Appendix B: Stressmottagningen's Questionnaires

Perceived Stress Scale

The questions in this scale ask you about your feelings and thoughts **during the last month**. In each case, you will be asked to indicate by circling *how often* you felt or thought a certain way.

Name _____ Date _____

Age _____ Gender (*Circle*): **M   F**   Other _____

0 = Never   1 = Almost Never   2 = Sometimes   3 = Fairly Often   4 = Very Often

1. In the last month, how often have you been upset because of something that happened unexpectedly?.................................	0	1	2	3	4
2. In the last month, how often have you felt that you were unable to control the important things in your life?.................................	0	1	2	3	4
3. In the last month, how often have you felt nervous and "stressed"?............	0	1	2	3	4
4. In the last month, how often have you felt confident about your ability to handle your personal problems?	0	1	2	3	4
5. In the last month, how often have you felt that things were going your way?...	0	1	2	3	4
6. In the last month, how often have you found that you could not cope with all the things that you had to do?	0	1	2	3	4
7. In the last month, how often have you been able to control irritations in your life?..	0	1	2	3	4
8. In the last month, how often have you felt that you were on top of things?..	0	1	2	3	4
9. In the last month, how often have you been angered because of things that were outside of your control?.................................	0	1	2	3	4
10. In the last month, how often have you felt difficulties were piling up so high that you could not overcome them?	0	1	2	3	4

Please feel free to use the *Perceived Stress Scale* for your research.

Mind Garden, Inc.
info@mindgarden.com
www.mindgarden.com

References
The PSS Scale is reprinted with permission of the American Sociological Association, from Cohen, S., Kamarck, T., and Mermelstein, R. (1983). A global measure of perceived stress. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior, 24,* 386-396.
Cohen, S. and Williamson, G. Perceived Stress in a Probability Sample of the United States. Spacapan, S. and Oskamp, S. (Eds.) *The Social Psychology of Health.* Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1988.

Clinical Perfectionism Questionnaire (CPQ)

Nedanstående självskattningsformulär handlar om perfektionism. Med perfektionism menas att eftersträva högt uppsatta krav, oavsett om du var framgångsrik i att uppnå dem eller inte. Fokus för detta självskattningsformulär är endast perfektionism som rör andra livsområden än matintag, vikt eller utseende.

Har du under den senaste månaden försökt att uppnå högt uppsatta krav, oavsett om du lyckades med detta eller inte (gäller inte matintag, vikt eller utseende)? Ringa in ditt svar:

Ja   **Nej**

Om du svarade ja: inom vilket eller vilka livsområden har detta varit aktuellt (gäller dock inte matintag, vikt eller utseende)? Till exempel, rörde det dina prestationer i arbetet, idrottssammanhang, musik, hemmet eller dylikt. Svara nedan:

....

....

Ringa nu in den siffra nedan som bäst stämmer överens med hur det har varit för dig den senaste månaden.

Under den senaste månaden…	Inte alls	Sällan	Ibland	Hela tiden
Har du pressat dig själv riktigt hårt för att nå dina mål?	1	2	3	4
Har du haft en tendens till att fokusera på det du uppnått snarare än det du inte uppnått?*	4	3	2	1
Har du fått höra av andra att du ställer för höga krav på dig själv?	1	2	3	4
Har du känt dig misslyckad som person för att du inte lyckats nå dina mål?	1	2	3	4
Har du varit rädd för att inte lyckas leva upp till dina krav?	1	2	3	4

Referens: Fairburn, C. G., Cooper, Z., & Shafran, R. (2003). *Clinical Perfectionism Questionnaire*. United Kingdom: Department of Psychiatry, University of Oxford.

Har du höjt kraven på dig själv på grund av att du tycker att de har varit för lätta att nå?	1	2	3	4
Har du dömt dig själv utifrån hur väl du lyckas att nå dina höga krav?	1	2	3	4
Har du bara gjort precis det som krävs för att klara dig?*	4	3	2	1
Har du vid upprepade tillfällen kontrollerat hur väl du har klarat att leva upp till dina krav (exempelvis genom att jämföra din prestation med andras)?	1	2	3	4
Tror du att andra personer har tänkt att du är en "perfektionist"?	1	2	3	4
Har du fortsatt att sträva mot att leva upp till dina krav, även om det har inneburit att du har missat andra saker i livet?	1	2	3	4
Har du undvikit situationer där dina prestationer ska bedömas för att du har varit rädd för att misslyckas?	1	2	3	4

*Omvänd poängräkning

Referens: Fairburn, C. G., Cooper, Z., & Shafran, R. (2003). *Clinical Perfectionism Questionnaire*. United Kingdom: Department of Psychiatry, University of Oxford.

One more questionnaire on general well-being was offered but cannot be shared in this appendix due to confidentiality.

Appendix C: A Priori Themes

Interviewee facts (general data)

Stress mindset

      Stress/press

      Stress coping

The pandemic

Work-life balance

      Depression, worry, and/or exhaustion

      Recovery and recuperation

      Physical shape

Perceived stress

      Lack of control

Stressors

      Increased workload

      (Lack of) resources

Perfectionism

      Own expectations

      Motivation

      Ability to say no

Work environment

      Leader support (the leader's leader)

Subordinate responsibility

      Worry of subordinates wellbeing

      Lack of control

Specific event

      Conflict situation

Control questions

      Effects not related to remote work

      Negative life event

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