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# **“How enforced remote work during Covid-19 affects employee engagement and how remote work could be used in the future” – A case study exploring the effects of remote work on engagement in two banks**

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**Title**

“How enforced remote work during Covid-19 affects employee engagement and how remote work could be used in the future” – A case study exploring the effects of remote work on engagement at two banks.

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**Abstract**

The Covid-19 pandemic has affected businesses all over the world. Businesses have been forced to adapt to the new circumstance in order to survive and maintain success. One of the adaptations that businesses have been forced to do is to transit into remote work, where employees work from home. The purpose of this thesis was to explore how employee engagement during work has been affected by working remotely and how the two banks in this study have maintained and ensured employee engagement. The literature review examined four concepts connected to employee engagement and four concepts connected to the drivers of employee engagement. These concepts were then used in order to create a conceptual framework that helped analyse and discuss the data. The framework is divided into three parts. The first part is remote work during Covid-19. This part referred to the current situation, as employees must work remotely due to Covid-19. The second and third parts were the core of the framework. The second part referred to the drivers that organisations use, and the third part referred to the concepts of employee engagement. The drivers of the second part were used to maintain the employee engagement concepts of the third part. With the use of the framework, the thesis found that the overall employee engagement had been negatively affected. Nevertheless, several strategies that were used to maintain the employee engagement during remote work were also found. This study concluded that these drivers are crucial to maintain employee engagement in order to decrease the negative effect of remote work.

**Keywords**

Employee engagement, Drivers of employee engagement, Well-being, Work-life balance, Leadership, Remote work.

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# 1. Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has been one of the largest behaviour-change phenomena in the last couple of decades, where businesses globally have had to adapt to social distancing in order to slow down the disease. The Covid-19 pandemic has not only affected but challenged the world, the economic markets and organisations. All over the world businesses have been affected one way or another (Plotkinof et al., 2020). One of the main consequences of the pandemic is the fact that organisations have been forced to adopt and arrange remote work solutions (Espitia et al., 2021). Remote work refers to employees having to work out of office, most likely from their homes.

The era of digitalization has yielded many opportunities for increased efficiency in communication. However, until today there has not been an external factor to push companies into exploring the capacity of remote work. As a direct result of the covid-19 outbreak, companies have been forced to adapt to remote workplace due to government regulations on social distancing and have thereby been forced to innovate their communication and labour strategies during remote work (Plotkinof at el., 2020). Furthermore, Leonardi (2020) explains the potential of remote work such as overall organisation efficiency and new technologies such as development of artificial intelligence. However, remote work has changed the normal work experience of employees and thus it has exposed the employees to uncertainty, stress and worry (Caligiuri et al., 2020). Hence, the current situation has created the opportunity to study how organisations have managed their employee engagement in remote workplaces.

As the Covid-19 pandemic has created worldwide uncertainty, organisations must manage employee engagement in order to be productive. Employee engagement is one of the most important drivers for organisations in order to be productive and challenging. Employee engagement is a significant factor in organisations in order to create revenue, growth and success. During times of crisis, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, where involuntary means have been taken, such as a transition to remote work, employee management is more important than ever. Even during a crisis, employee engagement can not only be maintained but improved if organisations make the right decision during the right time. As, mentioned earlier, remote work can cause uncertainty and stress which negatively affects employee engagement. Therefore, it

is vital for organisations to maintain employee engagement with the usage of organisational practises and drivers related to employee engagement (Chanana & Sangeeta, 2020).

## **1.2 Problematisation**

Employee engagement, which can be defined as the process of positively motivating employees cognitively, emotionally, and behaviorally toward fulfilling organisational outcomes, is essential for all organisations (Shuck & Herd, 2012). It contributes to psychological well-being, commitment and work performance. It also contributes to organisations productivity and profitability. Therefore, organisations must achieve employee engagement for the sake of their employees and organisations as a whole (Rothman & Baumann, 2014). However, during crisis situations, such as Covid-19, Chanana and Sangeeta (2020) argue that it is more important than ever for companies to maintain employee engagement.

Due to the Covid-19, businesses have been forced to transition into remote workplaces using virtual tools to communicate, plan and work to achieve organisational objectives. In order for companies to continue to do business and achieve goals, remote workplace solutions are not only an alternative anymore but rather a necessity for companies in the global business landscape of today (Mishra & Jena, 2020). Kraus et al. (2020) stated that the Covid-19 situation has made companies more open and accepting towards a digital workplace transition. The authors explain how the situation and restrictions make personal interaction hard and highlight the importance of fostering employee engagement while adopting remote work. The fact that companies are forced to adapt to the situation, allows them to investigate the opportunity of the benefits of digital communication and remote workplaces. Nevertheless, despite the potential opportunities remote work can bring, the pandemic has put pressure on employees as enforced remote work is a stressor that causes uncertainty (Caligiuri et al., 2020). Organisations must be aware of the mental press that enforced remote work can bring upon employees, which in turn affect the engagement of employees.

The stress and uncertainty that the present Covid-19 situation can cause decrease in well-being and emotional capacity. Therefore, it affects employee engagement in organisations. Caligiuri et al. (2020) explain how remote work can cause ambiguity and uncertainty among employees as it is a radical, involuntary change in the work environment and thus, it affects employee engagement. Therefore, it is vital for organisations to maintain and create employee and

workforce engagement in order to continue to be productive and efficient during remote work. Organisations must provide strategies and practises in order to maintain employee engagement during Covid-19 and remote work (Chanana & Sangeeta, 2020).

Foss (2020) has stated that the pandemic will leave a permanent mark on organisational design and work routines and there will be “a new normal” in the business world henceforth. Foss has (2020) further argued that the on-site workspace scenario will most likely not return back to former proportions. However, human resource management is consistently looking to innovate, create and find effective ways to enhance employee engagement during crises such as Covid-19 (Chanana & Sangeeta, 2020).

It is the organisation's responsibility to maintain and ensure employee engagement, hence different kinds of *drivers* that positively affect employee engagement are of importance for organisations. These drivers are presented later in the study. As the present situation of Covid-19 has forced organisations to adapt to remote work, organisations must adapt strategies to maintain employee engagement during these times of uncertainty. As the effects of enforced remote work on employee engagement are relatively unexplored and as the unique opportunity to study it has arisen as a result of the pandemic, it is possible to explore what kinds of drivers organisations exploit in order to maintain employee engagement. In addition, understanding how the organisations have exploited the drivers of engagement in order to maintain employee engagement during this time can have practical implications for the future human resource management. The research took place in two banks which are presented in chapter three. The findings of what kind of drivers that the banks use to maintain employee engagement during remote work may be of use by other companies or as the foundation of future crises that may affect employee engagement.



### **1.3 Purpose and Research Question.**

The purpose of this article is to explore employee engagement during enforced remote work as a result of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic at two banks. Furthermore, the paper examines how these two banks have sought to maintain and create employee engagement during remote work.

Our research questions are the following:

#### **How does enforced remote work during Covid-19 affects employee engagement?**

- What engagement drivers have been used to maintain an engaged workforce?
- Will remote work be a part of business in the future?

## **2. Literature Review**

In order to study how enforced remote work has affected employee engagement and what drivers' organisations have exploited to create employee engagement and what it could mean for the future, the following chapter will define and discuss the concepts that were used in this study. These concepts are Covid-19 and remote workplace (as remote workplace is a forced transition due to the Covid-19 pandemic), employee engagement and drivers of employee engagement. Furthermore, this chapter investigates and explains vital concepts connected to the creation of employee engagement. These are emotional commitment, psychological factors, well-being and work life balance. In order to create employee engagement, these concepts must be acknowledged by organisations. Thereafter, concepts related to drivers of employee engagement are presented. The purpose of these drivers is to use the knowledge to create strategies to achieve emotional commitment, psychological factors, well-being and work life balance, thus, maintaining employee engagement. Based on these concepts, a conceptual model is presented at the end of this chapter which is used to structure the paper and analyse the data.

### **2.1 Covid-19 and Remote work**

The world is now in the midst of a global crisis due to the Covid-19 virus outbreak, which has led to the requirement of drastic transformation of organisational operations and strategy (Ferreira et al., 2021). Government restrictions and lockdowns have pushed organisations to adopt remote work at a pace many believed to be impossible (LaBerge et al., 2020). In other words, the pandemic has forced companies to adapt how work is organised and how jobs are designed. One of the adaptations that companies have been forced to do is the transition to remote work (Collings et al., 2021).

In their article, Kolb et al. (2020) stated that the trend to work from home was in motion pre-Covid. However, in just a few months, the pandemic has led to adoption of changes in organisations that, under normal circumstances, would have taken years to pull through (LaBerge et al., 2020). Based on a survey conducted by McKinsey & Company, companies have accelerated the digitalisation of their internal operations with such a pace not believed to be possible before the crisis. A reason for this could be the fact that such a speedy digital transformation has not been a business priority before. Now, it has become a requirement for businesses to meet the government imposed restrictions in order to stay competitive and productive (LaBerge et al., 2020).

As mentioned before, trends suggest that working remotely is transforming the workplace in the direction to a more flexible and remote one (Kolb et al., 2020). Remote work refers to working out of office, most common at home, thus a change in the working landscape. As remote work solutions have not been a priority and not been transforming as drastically before the pandemic, we have yet to discover the full potential of the technologies and strategies involving those. Remote work could be a strategy for organisations that are striving for increased internal flexibility or worker mobility. It has the potential to reduce costs by enabling recruitment in various places and employees can save travel expenses. Furthermore, the strategy has the potential to aid the employees to structure their day in a manner that helps them obtain a good work-life balance and also provides the employee with a greater sense of autonomy which has a positive influence on job satisfaction (Ferreira et al., 2021).

As the Covid-19 situation is very different for many managers and employees, several challenges have occurred due to the sudden transition into remote work. Some challenges that managers have to account for is to control and help develop the employees' home infrastructure in order to avoid poor quality of communication, to measure employee performance, to maintain team cohesion and to control employees' adaptation to remote work (Ferreira et al., 2021). Furthermore, challenges for the employees that have been observed are for instance, a lack of concentration due to the climate at home, a lack of equipment and a lack of knowledge to use the new technologies (Chanana & Sangeeta, 2020; Newman & Ford, 2021). Moreover, employees may be stressed about their health, job security and salary (Chanana & Sangeeta, 2020). Yet, Ferreira et al. (2021) found that remote work in general advocates more positive aspects in relation to the negative ones.

The third annual Future Workforce Report – 2019 estimated that by 2028, 73% of all business teams will have remote workers to deliver higher productivity at lower costs. The recent survey report conducted by employee recognition and rewards company O.C. Tanner mentions that post-crisis, both employees and organisations would have positive perceptions about remote work culture. The report findings also mention that while welcoming the culture and practice of remote work, still there is prevalence of anxiety, fear and isolation in the minds of the employees. Thus, to deal with, organisations need to adopt various mindfulness techniques and practices to keep the employees focussed, positive, energised and proactive. Organisations need to inculcate a very engaging culture by providing amicable balance between the personal and

professional life of the employees. Even if working from a remote location, proper techniques and strategies need to be adopted for providing continuous learning opportunities through e-learning platforms. Similarly, transparent communication channels and proper team collaboration also need to be fostered by the organisations even if the workforce operates virtually.

In conclusion, in order for the employees to be productive and efficient in their work during remote work, they need to be able to express job engagement (Chanana & Sangeeta, 2020). Thus, to exploit possibilities of a remote workplace that could lead to increased efficiency and productivity, organisations first must understand how enforced remote work impacts employee engagement and how to manage to create employee engagement with the use of different drivers of employee engagement.

## **2.2 Employee engagement**

Eldor and Gadot (2017) defined employee engagement as an active, fulfilling and work-related state of mind that includes a strong identification with the organisation and self-expression. Moreover, it can be defined as the individual's involvement, satisfaction and enthusiasm for work (Gruman & Saks, 2011). The scholars argued that employee engagement is the key for businesses' success and competitiveness. In addition, Gruman and Saks (2011) emphasized that employee engagement is essential for organisations and that businesses can gain competitive advantage through employee engagement and thus it is vital for organisations to create an engaged workforce. Moreover, employee engagement is positively linked with their job performance and is therefore desired by organisations during a crisis such as the Covid-19 situation. Clearly, employee engagement is incredibly important and must be achieved and created during times of remote work. The authors stated that employee engagement may not only stay the same as before but increase during crises if the company takes the right measures and decisions at the right time (Chanana & Sangeeta, 2020). Furthermore, the authors explained that employee engagement should be prioritized by companies both in good and bad times. In order to develop employee engagement during remote workplaces as a means to adapt to the situation of Covid-19, companies need to manage employee engagement (Chanana & Sangeeta, 2020). As remote work is relatively unused by many organisations, it could cause more uncertainty which would instead have a negative effect on engagement and performance. In

table one, a list of the identified areas that affect employee engagement can be viewed. These are the four areas of employee engagement that are used in the conceptual framework.

**Table 1.**

*Employee engagement concepts*

| <b>Area</b>                  | <b>Description</b>   | <b>Authors</b>  |
|------------------------------|--|---|
| <b>Emotional Commitment</b>  | Refers to the importance of emotional commitment towards organisations. Emotional commitment creates energy and focus which benefit the organisation.        | Gupta & Sharma (2016)<br>Gruman & Saks (2011)<br>Shuck & Herd (2012)<br>Huang, Ma and Meng (2018)                                 |
| <b>Psychological factors</b> | Refers to psychological parameters that need to be fulfilled in order to maintain engagement, such as meaningfulness, safety and availability in work.       | Gruman & Saks (2011)<br>Gruman & Saks (2014)<br>Chanana & Sangeeta (2020)<br>Frazier et al. (2016)<br>Binyamin & Carmeli (2010)   |
| <b>Well-being</b>            | Refers to employees' health and are of most importance in order to create employee engagement. Can be affected by stressors that cause emotional exhaustion. | Conway et al. (2018)<br>Knight et al. (2016)<br>Chanana & Sangeeta (2020)<br>Chillakuri & Vanka (2020)<br>Caligiuri et al. (2020) |
| <b>Work-Life-Balance</b>     | Refers to the balance between family life and work life. A good balance creates good well-being and thus employee engagement.                                | Wood et al. (2020)<br>Cain et al. (2018)<br>Caligiuri et al. (2020)   |

### 2.2.1 Emotional commitment

Gupta and Sharma (2016) stressed the importance of emotional commitment towards the organisation and the amount of discretionary effort displayed by the employees towards their work. The emotional aspect explains *how* an employee feels towards the organisation. Not only is engagement a key factor to individual attitudes and performance but also to business performance and productivity. Thus, employee commitment indirectly affects financial performance and shareholder returns as employee commitment is important for employee engagement (Gruman & Saks, 2011). The authors explained that emotional commitment is something that corporations desire as it promotes energy, enthusiasm and focused effort. Furthermore, Gruman and Saks (2011) stated that engaged employees are energetically and effectively connected to their work. Shuck and Herd (2012) further argued that emotional commitment towards the organisation is strengthened by motivational and inspired leadership and thus, causing employee engagement to increase. Moreover, it is important that organisations express their confidence that the employees can achieve organisational objectives and goals (Shuck & Herd, 2012). Huang, Ma and Meng (2018), agreed as they pointed out that commitment creates high organisational performance and high job satisfaction. In addition, they

agreed with previous authors as they argued that committed employees feel a deep connection towards their company and their work.

Moreover, Chanana and Sangeeta (2020) also explained that employee engagement is beneficial for organisational values and goals as it increases productivity, work satisfaction and development. Gupta and Sharma (2016) stated that emotional commitment can be viewed as an employee who is fully involved and engaged about the organisation and his or her work. Thus, it is vital for organisations to make employees feel positively and engaged about the organisation and its goals and values in order to achieve emotional commitment (Gupta & Sharma, 2016). In order to enhance emotional commitment during a crisis, organisations need to make efforts so that the employees genuinely feel interested in the organisation. Therefore, Chanana and Sangeeta (2020) highlighted the importance of achieving employee engagement in crisis times like the Covid-19 pandemic. However, not only is the emotional aspect of employee engagement of importance but psychological factors as well (Gruman & Saks 2011).

### **2.2.2 Psychological factors**

Psychological factors refer to psychological parameters that need to be accounted for in order to achieve employee engagement. The psychological factors are psychological meaningfulness, psychological safety and psychological availability.

The first factor is psychological meaningfulness which refers to the belief of how meaningful it is for an employee to perform within the organisation. In order to achieve employee engagement, employees must feel meaningfulness towards their job. It builds on the perception that one is receiving returns while investing oneself in the organisations. Psychological meaningfulness and thus engagement is achieved when an employee feels valuable and that they matter thus creating meaning to their work (Gruman & Saks, 2011). Gruman and Saks (2014) explained that meaningfulness refers to employees that feel appreciated and not taken for granted. Meaningfulness can be enhanced by organisational practises that enrich the tasks, roles and work that an individual display (Gruman & Saks, 2014). Furthermore, Gruman and saks (2014) argued that practises such as job control, tasks variety and feedback increase meaningfulness and thus, engagement. Chanana and Sangeeta (2020) agreed with this as they pointed out the importance of feedback in times of crisis, such as the Covid-19 pandemic.

The second factor is psychological safety which refers to an employees' perception of how safe it is to bring oneself to a role of performance without fear of damage to one's self-image, career or status (Gruman and Saks, 2014). It is related to social work environments such as interpersonal relationships, intergroup dynamics and management style where people feel safe to express themselves. Hence, organisations must implement protective guarantees in order for psychological safety to create workplace engagement. Furthermore, Gruman and Saks (2014) argued that social work environments that inspire support and trust foster psychological safety. Frazier et al.(2016) also explained the importance of psychological safety in the workplace as it reduces perceived threats and creates an environment which allows failure and expressions without retaliation, enunciation or negative consequences to one's self-image. In addition, the authors argued that psychological safety creates a workplace safe for risk taking. However, as the normal workplace has changed to a remote workplace, it is important to maintain psychological safety. Although, the Covid-19 pandemic is a globally shared stress-producing experience which can foster a natural desire to connect with others thus it could strengthen social work relationships. The pandemic offers a chance for employees to bond and express themselves and their emotions caused by the pandemic, thus creating a sense of coherence (Caligiuri et al., 2020).

The third factor is called psychological availability. This refers to the belief that employees' have the physical, emotional and psychological resources required to invest in a work performance role. Employees will be more engaged if a workplace provides them with these kinds of resources necessary to perform in a role. The psychological resources will create energy and focus. (Gruman & Saks 2014). The focus that employees acquire in their work engagement allows them to use their full potential and enhance the quality of their work responsibility. However, lack of energy and great insecurity decreases psychological availability and thus employee engagement (Gruman and Saks 2014). Furthermore, Binyamin and Carmeli (2010) explained that psychological availability creates employee creativity which not only creates engagement but productivity. Binyamin and Carmeli (2010) stated that human resources management processes are positively linked to psychological availability.

Organisations need to enhance the feeling of certainty and secureness in order to achieve psychological availability among employees (Binyamin & Carmeli, 2010). Therefore, during challenging times, psychological availability becomes important to maintain. The sudden change in the work environment can affect employees' performance and comfort as it increases

stress and ambiguity thus affecting psychological resources (Caligiuri et al., 2020). Moreover, in order for employees to display engagement in work during remote work, well-being and work-life balance must be prioritized by organisations and human resource management.

### **2.2.3 Well-being**

Conway et al. (2018) explained that well-being in the workplace refers to employees' health. The authors found that employees that achieve workplace well-being increases job performance and thus, employee engagement. Work stressors and factors that cause emotional exhaustion can negatively impact employee engagement, which in turn can reduce employee engagement. Well-being can be increased by organisational focus on resources in the work environment such as social support, feedback and autonomy (Knight et al., 2016). This is exactly what Chanana and Sangeeta (2020) suggested in times of crisis, as they argued that organisational commitment towards the employees, support and feedback is of most importance during crisis situations. To increase well-being is therefore important during remote work because according to Chanana and Sangeeta (2020) the pandemic situation has created more stress which affects well-being. In addition, a safe social work environment and a sense of belonging can increase well-being and decrease stress.

Chillakuri and Vanka (2020) argued that human resource management needs to address negative factors that affect health badly and, thus, well-being. At the same time, organisations must promote employees' motivation, as well-being is a factor to create a committed and engaged workforce which can result in competitive advantage (Chillakuri & Vanka, 2020). Moreover, the authors stated that crisis situations at the workplace can cause uncertainty which negatively affects well-being as it enhances stress and thereby affects engagement. Although, as mentioned earlier, the department of human resource management is the foundation of implementing well-being among employees, it must focus on employees' welfare rather than organisational performance. (Chillakuri & Vanka 2020).

Caligiuri et al. (2020) stated that the current Covid-19 situation affects health and well-being as working from home could be viewed as a stressor. This sudden change that remote workplaces exhibit challenges managers and organisations to implement actions in order to maintain and create well-being. The whole world is experiencing a collective state of stress and therefore organisations must provide support practises to mitigate the stress and maintain well-being (Caligiuri et al., 2020). Nevertheless, the rapid change in work environment and remote



workplace causes a work-at-home situation and affects workload, ambiguity and overall challenges in everyday life (Caligiuri et al., 2020). Therefore, employee and workforce engagement are affected by the work-life balance.

#### **2.2.4 Work-life balance**

Work-life balance (WLB) refers to the degree of satisfaction employees obtain from the balance between home life and work life. The workplace and work environment of an employee can affect the non-work life and vice versa (Wood et al., 2020). Employees' must feel a positive and beneficial WLB in order to create well-being and thus, work engagement. Cain et al. (2018) agreed as they argued that a good WLB creates productivity and engagement at the workplace. The result of an engaged employee creates a positive energy, higher energy and satisfaction and willingness toward achieving organisational goals which positively and directly affects the life sphere. In addition, WLB affects job satisfaction and home-life satisfaction (Cain et al., 2018). Employees who achieve WLB participate in activities, both in work roles and life roles, that are meaningful and thereby experience less stress (Cain et al., 2018). However, employees that transition from a work role to a family role may find it difficult due to limited resources and thus causing a negative effect on WLB.

Wood et al. (2020) pointed out that during the last couple of decades the line between work life and family life has become blurred due to changes in family structure, technological changes and the introduction of remote work. Clearly remote work has its impact on WLB as it is a change in environments (Wood et al., 2020). The authors stated that work engagement and WLB is related to one another as a positive experience on one of these positively affects the other. A good WLB creates energy, self-efficacy and positive attitude which according to Gruman and Saks 2011 increase employee engagement (Wood et al., 2020). Caligiuri et al. (2020) explained that as remote work (work-from-home) is involuntary, employees can have a hard time to quit working and thus it can cause increased working hours and WLB conflicts. This is due to the fact that the line between work life and family life becomes blurry as people are working from home. This causes the borders of family life and work life to be re-organised.

Nevertheless, Caligiuri et al. (2020) highlighted the importance of human resource management practices to help and encourage healthy and safe work practises that take place remotely. With the usage of practise to ensure and promote a positive WLB it can reinforce employees' work motivation and engagement and continuance commitment which is vital in times of Covid-19.

The pandemic offers an opportunity for managers to investigate how to implement flexible work arrangements that can enhance the health and safety of employees well into the future. Nevertheless, as mentioned earlier, organisations must provide drivers in order to maintain employee engagement during remote work. Thus, the next part in the chapter will discuss how organisations can create engagement among the employees with the use of human resource practises.

## **2.3 Drivers of employee engagement**

The level of employee engagement generated by factors such as emotional commitment, psychological factors, well-being and WLB that were discussed in the previous section, will not be increased by itself. However, the organisation can take actions to increase the level of engagement by using different human resource practices. Without strategic human resource practices, the organisation risks demoralizing their employees which can lead to lower levels of efficiency, productivity and to resignations. Therefore, it is of importance for the organisation to ensure engagement of all employees. In this section, these practices are categorized in different drivers of employee engagement.

The literature suggests that researchers in the field have identified many drivers of employee engagement. The knowledge of these drivers can be used practically in order to create a strategy for managing the engagement level of the employees. Chanana and Sangeeta (2020) found that organisations and their leaders must take responsibility and motivate the employees to achieve future goals in order to engage them. The drivers that are relevant for and used in this study are: Leadership, autonomy, internal communication and job security. These factors were found in the study conducted by Sundaray (2011) and selected based on relevance and application to the context of Covid-19 and remote work. In addition, Sundaray (2011) explained that equality and development opportunities are drivers that can affect employee engagement. However, these concepts are not relevant for this study as equality and development opportunities are created over a long period of time, hence not affected by the pandemic.

### **2.3.1 Leadership**

*The process of influencing others to understand and agree about what needs to be done and how to do it, and the process of facilitating individual and collective efforts to accomplish shared objectives -Yukl 2010 (p.8)*

Leadership has shown to play a role in the creation of employee engagement (Bedarkar & Pandita, 2014). The definition of leadership by Yukl (2010), revealed that leadership involves good communication (which will be further discussed below) and strategies to aid the employees in their work. Sundaray (2011) argued that the type of leadership that is a driver for employee engagement is the type that succeeds in communicating the core values of the organisation in a clear and unambiguous way. Moreover, the leader must acknowledge every employee's qualities and contributions in all positions within the organisation. Furthermore, good ethical standards have shown to have a positive influence on employee engagement (Sundaray, 2011). Bedarkar and Pandita (2014) argued that leadership affects motivation, job satisfaction and commitment, which are all constructs that have an influence on employee engagement. The leader that inspires trust, is supportive and creates an environment free of blame, is creating psychological safety which mentioned earlier has a positive influence on employee engagement (Bedarkar & Pandita, 2014). Moreover, Bedarkar and Pandita (2014) found that only specific leader behaviors can lead to employee engagement, and among those the most successful are those that enhance follower performance. They found that power sharing and communication are leadership traits that positively affect employee engagement (Bedarkar & Pandita, 2014).

Different styles of leadership have been found to be successful in different contexts. In their study, Sukoco et al. (2020) looked at transactional and transformational leadership in order to determine how to optimize a company's human resources in times of Covid-19. They found that the type of leaders needed in a crisis are transformational leaders, who can manage employee engagement. The characteristics of transformational leaders that have shown success in a highly changing environment are that they are calmer, more flexible and adaptive (Sukoco et al., 2020)

### **2.3.2 Autonomy**

Autonomy "is the ability to make your own decisions while not being controlled by anyone else" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2021). According to Sundaray (2011), it is important for employees to be included in the decisions that impact their work. Autonomy creates trust and challenge which are constructs that have a positive influence on psychological meaningfulness which is a condition for employee engagement (Sundaray, 2011). Another study suggested that

giving employees more job autonomy may lead to more energetic, enthusiastic, and dedicated work (Malinovska et al., 2018)

According to Wang et al. (2020), previous research on remote work where autonomy has a positive effect on employee engagement as it leads to WLB. However, the vast majority of the research on remote work has previously been conducted on the rare few who actually qualified to work from home, based on self-discipline. Procrastination has been identified in prior research as a variable in remote working. The pandemic, however, has created an enforced remote work where not all employees might be suited for it based on discipline. This has created an enforced job autonomy that might not have been warranted for those employees who struggle with procrastination (Wang et al., 2020). Therefore, based on their findings, Wang et al. (2020) theorize that as a result of the drastic transition in the work environment, job autonomy might not play as big a role as expected. Managers might not have had the time and resources to establish the right arrangements for autonomy to affect WLB to the extent that could be possible under other circumstances. Additionally, the study found that job autonomy in the remote work context played a role in reducing loneliness (Wang, et al., 2020) which has a positive effect on well-being.

### **2.3.3 Internal communication**

The internal communication is all communication that occurs within the organisation among the managers and employees. According to Bedarkar & Pandita (2014), “internal communication is an organisational practice, which effectively conveys the organisational values to all employees and thus, obtains their support in reaching organisational goals” (Bedarkar & Pandita, 2014). Based on prior research they found that internal communication is an important factor in ensuring employee engagement. In line with this knowledge, their findings suggested that poor communication hampers employee engagement. Moreover, it is essential for employees that the leader successfully communicate their role in order for them to relate to it and thereby become more engaged (Bedarkar & Pandita, 2014).

Furthermore, Vercici (2011) found a positive relationship between the satisfaction of the internal communication and employee engagement, which also is consistent with the previous research and relevant for this research. The level of engagement is increasing when employees are emotionally in contact with others and when it is clear what is expected from them (Vercic, 2021). The effect of unambiguity is in line with the findings of Sundaray (2011) Vercici (2011)

argued that it is due to the fact that they then have all the information they need to succeed in their work and thereby all possibilities to develop. However, Vercici (2011) stated that the positive relationship of internal communication satisfaction and employee engagement that resulted from the study indicated that the casual direction could not be determined (Vercic, 2021). According to Sundaray (2011), the organisation should establish a clear line of communication across levels in an open-door policy manner. In line with the findings about autonomy, Sundaray (2011) argued that employees should be given a say in the decision making in order to increase the likelihood for higher levels of employee engagement (Sundaray, 2011).

### **2.3.6 Job security**

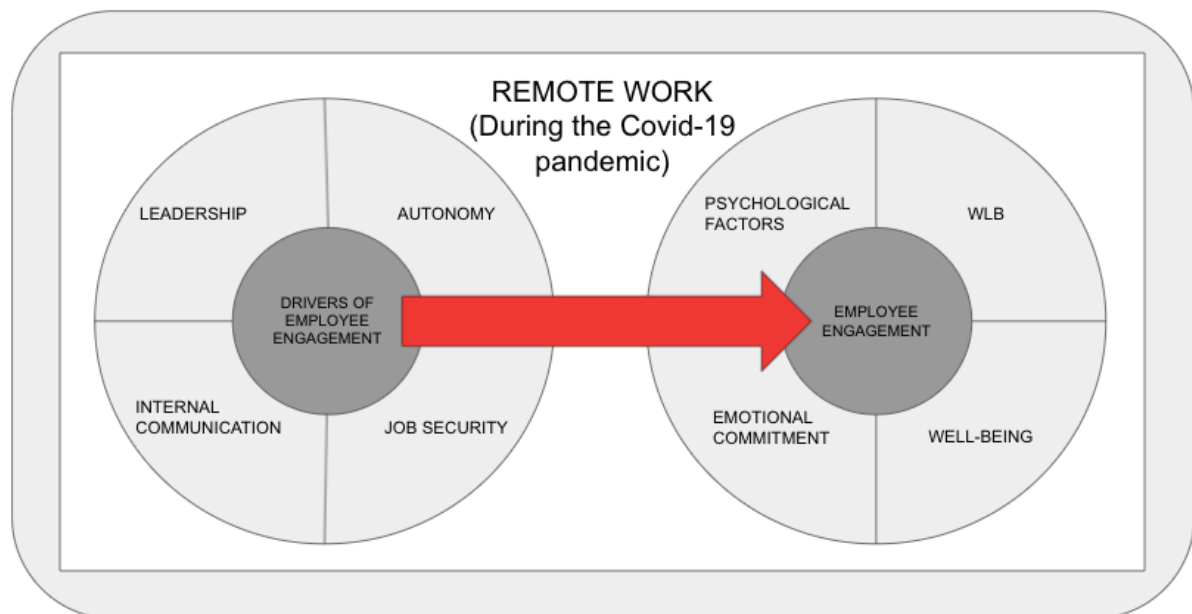
Based on the literature found on employee engagement, job security plays a role in the level of engagement experienced by the employees. Sundaray (2011) pointed out that if employees do not feel safe, the level of engagement tends to be low. In their article, van Schalkwyk et al. (2010) described job insecurity as the general concern about one's job. van Schalkwyk et al. (2010) referred to prior research that suggested that job insecurity is a chronic stressor and that it has an effect on the well-being of the employees and thereby the organisation as a whole. Employees that are insecure about their job are less likely to support and make an effort for organisational goals as their future situation within the organisation is not safe or reliable and might even resign as a result (van Schalkwyk et al., 2010). However, in their study, van Schalkwyk et al. (2010) did not find a statistically significant relationship between job insecurity and employee engagement, nor between turnover intention and employee engagement. They hypothesized that the contradictory findings might be explained by a difference between government employees and employees within the private sector (van Schalkwyk et al., 2010).

## 2.4 Conceptual framework

In order to structure the analysis, a conceptual model was developed based on the findings of the literature review. A model was proposed in which both the drivers of employee engagement and the employee engagement concepts operate simultaneously in the context of enforced remote work due to the Covid-19 pandemic (See fig.1). The two circles of drivers and engagement concepts are the core of the framework. Remote work due to Covid-19 in the white area refers to the whole foundation of which this study is based on. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, companies have been forced to adapt their organisational strategies and one of these is the adaptation to remote work. As the situation of remote work impacts employee engagement, companies need to maintain employee engagement. Therefore, the two core circles, the main parts of the framework, represent the drivers of employee engagement which led to four aspects of employee engagement.

**Figure 1.**

*Conceptual framework - Drivers that generate employee engagement during remote work praxis due to Covid-19*



The circle that describes **drivers of employee engagement** refers to different drivers that organisations can exploit in order to maintain and ensure employee engagement during remote work. The drivers of employee engagement were identified mainly from the critical factors that lead to employee engagement and adopted for Sundaray's (2011) study. There are four drivers in our framework namely, leadership, autonomy, job security and internal communication. The

arrow connects the drivers of employee engagement to employee engagement. The purpose of the arrow is to display that the drivers of employee engagement are exploited to maintain and ensure employee engagement.

Thereafter, the second circle to the right represents **employee engagement**, and it is divided into four different aspects that emerged from the review of prior research which play an important role. The four concepts that were identified as employee engagement were WLB, emotional commitment, well-being and psychological factors which lead to employee engagement. The four concepts that affect employee engagement were developed from articles regarding employee engagement (see table 1). These four concepts were presented and discussed in different articles, all of which analysed employee engagement. Through this research of employee engagement, these four concepts were repeatedly recurrent in articles regarding engagement and hence suitable to create a conceptual framework around. As these concepts were used in order to analyse and discuss employee engagement, the four concepts were brought together in order to analyse employee engagement as a whole.

## 3. Methodology

In this chapter, the chosen methodology will be presented and argued for. Firstly, the theoretical methodology will be presented, which includes the choice of research philosophy, research approach and theory. Finally, the empirical methodology will be explained, which includes the choice of research design, research strategy, data collection, data analysis, trustworthiness and limitations.

### 3.1 Research philosophy

Bryman and Bell (2015) mention three different research philosophies namely positivism, realism and interpretivism, which have different approaches to what should be considered acceptable knowledge (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Interpretivism advocates that an interpreter is needed as an instrument to measure a subjective meaning of social phenomena rather than solely on knowledge that can be confirmed by objective measures (Bryman & Bell, 2015). In social science, in contrast to natural science, phenomena cannot be restricted to confirmation by objective measures as an important part of the discipline involves subjective meanings. This study seeks to gain knowledge of subjective nature that requires an intellectual synthesis to acquire knowledge. In consideration of the purpose of this study, interpretivism was chosen as the philosophy to approach the research, studying subjective opinions.

### 3.2 Research approach

Based on the nature of the aim of the study, an abductive research approach was chosen. According to Bryman and Bell (2015), abductive research is used as an approach to empirical phenomena which have not yet been considered. It involves a back-and-forth consideration between observations and prior research (Bryman & Bell, 2015). An extensive literature review was conducted and based on the findings a conceptual framework was created to organise the theory to facilitate analysis. The conceptual model was used to link the key concepts in the theory to one another. The two organisations that were observed generated qualitative data which provided insights that were compared to, and extended the theory.

In order to retrieve information regarding the literature review and to help create the conceptual framework, articles were analysed. These articles were retrieved from *HKR summon* which is a database that the students of Högskolan Kristianstad can use. All the articles have been peer-



reviewed in order to create trustworthiness. Keywords such as *employee engagement*, *well-being*, *remote work*, *Covid-19*, *human resources* and *management strategies* were some of the used keywords.

### **3.3 Research strategy**

A qualitative research strategy was chosen for the study. According to Bryman and Bell (2015), a qualitative strategy is focused on an inductive approach. The main goal of the abductive approach in this study was the generation of theory, thus a qualitative strategy made sense. Additionally, based on the interpretivist epistemological orientation of the study, a qualitative strategy is also best suited (Bryman & Bell, 2015). As the aim of this research is to study the opinions of employees, that are emphasized in words, and connect them to different strategies, it does not serve the purpose to quantify the collection and analysis of data.

### **3.4 Research design**

The research design chosen for this study was a multiple case study design. A case study is a detailed and extensive analysis of a single case (Bryman & Bell, 2015), in this instance, an organisation. As the aim of the study was to find out how organisations have managed employee engagement during enforced remote work, it required a deep understanding of the HRM and how the employees have reacted to the changes. The type of case study that was chosen was the representative or the typical case in order to generate findings based on a case that exemplified a general organisation. To answer concerns of external validity, two case studies were conducted to provide comparison.

### **3.5 Data collection**

In this section, the qualitative method is presented in detail. The method used was a multiple case study with a qualitative approach consisting of primary data collected from semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews are based on a list of questions with rather specific topics to be covered (Bryman & Bell, 2015). These topics were based on the conceptual model to facilitate analysis: The interview guide (Appendix 1) was divided into categories of questions related to the drivers of employee engagement and their outcome. Only interviews were used as data collection, as the main objective was to explore employees' thoughts. Due to the nature of this type of data, semi-structured interviews enabled catching additional valuable opinions

through answers to questions that were not included in the interview guide prior to the interview.

The multiple case study was based on two Swedish banks located in two different regions of Skåne. The case consisted of four respondents in one bank and five respondents the others. In the first bank, one upper-level manager was interviewed and three employees. In the second bank, one HR-represent, one upper-level manager and three employees were interviewed. The participants of the study can be viewed in (Appendix 2). In the analyses, each participant is referred to as *AX-EX*, *AY-DY*, where A to E are the participants and X and Y are the banks they represent. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes. The data from the interviews were audio-recorded with consent from all the respondents. The quotes (appendix 3) from the interviews are the foundation of the data used to analyse in chapter four. In order to fulfill the purpose of this thesis, the authors of this thesis had to gain information from companies. The authors found two managers in their contact network within the same industry, namely the banking industry. Many employees in the banking industry have gone through drastic changes due to the pandemic which qualified it for the purpose of this study.

### **3.6 Data analysis**

The audio-recorded data were transcribed using Microsoft Word's transcription software. As the software was not completely trustworthy, the transcriptions were corrected manually. Thereafter, the analysis of the data began using open coding. Bryman and Bell (2015) describe open coding as 'the process of breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing and categorizing data'. This was done by identifying the relevant main categories that were called *first order concepts*, which were structured as the drivers of employee engagement found in the conceptual model. Thereafter, the first order concepts were broken down into subcategories that were called *second order themes*, which were categorized solely based on the empirical findings. Subsequently, relevant quotes from the participants were found with the help of the search function in Microsoft Word, by searching for relevant words. The transcriptions were also read in detail to avoid missing out on relevant information. The process of extracting quotes from the interviews proceeded until a clear picture of the theoretical relationships emerged. The data structure is found in Appendix 3, which illustrates the relationships of the finding.

### 3.7 Trustworthiness

According to Bryman and Bell (2015) there are four criteria in order to achieve trustworthiness. These are *credibility*, *transferability*, *dependability*, and *confirmability*. Bryman and Bell (2015) explain trustworthiness reflects on how good a certain qualitative research is. Credibility refers to how credible the results and findings are (Bryman and Bell, 2015). Therefore, it is important to ask the right questions which are connected to the conceptual framework in order to create and credible analysis. Supervisor, Indira Kjellstrand, has reviewed the interview question that is used in order to gain information. Transferability refers to if the results can be applied in other contexts (Bryman and Bell, 2015). This thesis discusses the impact on employee engagement during remote work and how the two banks maintain the employee engagement. Hopefully this thesis can be applied in future context when a similar crisis situation occurs. Then the findings of this thesis can be used in order to maintain employee engagement. Bryman and Bell (2015) explain dependability as if similar research in this area would create the same results. As this thesis analyses two certain banks, if similar research were conducted within the same two banks the results would most likely be the same. However, if research were conducted with the same aim but in other organisations, the result might differ compared to this thesis. Confirmability refers to the level of unbiasedness with the authors and how the authors own values have not affected the research (Bryman and Bell, 2015). This research has been conducted without any agenda, with the sole purpose of presenting facts that are found from the interviews. No bank has tried to influence the outcome of this thesis. The authors of the thesis are impartial of the outcome and all the interviews have been saved if re-analysis is needed.

## 4. Analysis and discussion

In this chapter, the empirical findings will be presented, analysed and discussed based on the conceptual framework. Quotes used to analyse the data are presented in appendix 3, and the coding for the references to the participants can be found in appendix 2.

### 4.1 Leadership

Based on the findings, it is clear that employees in both banks have a positive experience of the leadership during the pandemic: Apparently, it has not changed much in itself, only the methods. They all acknowledge that no one could have been prepared for these kinds of circumstances, and that their leaders have done what is in their power to make the best out of the situation at hand. Furthermore, they argue that the leaders have learnt along the way about which strategies are working and which are not. In the findings from the interviews, five second order themes during remote work as a result of the pandemic arose, namely, clarity, contact, information flow and adaptiveness and support and care.

#### 4.1.1 Adaptiveness

The findings suggest that the management in the banks started to adapt to the pandemic as soon as it began. Participant B in bank X argued that *“the leaders did their best from the beginning and that they learned along the way about for instance communication and clarity in regards to the new circumstances”*. In bank Y, the management also showed signs of adaptiveness. Participant D in bank Y described that their boss *“has been checking with us what we want our relationship to look like and so forth, and then adapted to that. It is working really well. He is accessible for quick decisions.”*

Participants in both banks argue that the well-being has decreased due to the circumstances arisen by the pandemic. The findings suggest that the factors that have contributed to the decrease have been a direct result of the enforced restrictions. Both of the interviewed leaders have adapted and taken measures to approach these factors in order to reduce the effect on the employee’s well-being. In bank X, the leader that was interviewed stated that her leadership had not really changed, however the means had changed. She (EX) argued that:

*The leadership in itself might not have changed; however, the way to exert it in a digital way has been forced to change. One (as a leader) has to accept not to be able to have the connection and insight (as before) and feel comfortable with that.*

In this statement it is clear that the leader in bank Y has a calm and adaptable approach to the situation. When the manager (AY) in bank Y was asked how his leadership had changed he argued that the difference was in the communication. He stressed the importance of having more individual meetings due to the absence of random chats that happen in the office. He said that *“what we have done is to call each employee continuously, not every week, but from time to time...and it becomes a checkup.”* According to AY this is his way of adapting to the fact that it is harder to speak up in a digital meeting than in a physical one. Inspiring leadership is of importance to maintain emotional commitment, according to Shuck and Herd (2012), and as the leaders have adopted and taken measures during this situation it can be connected to Shuck and Herd’s (2020) findings of inspiring leadership. Moreover, employees are in coherence with their leaders regarding their leadership.

The general perception of the participants is that they are content with the leadership during remote work in times of pandemic. The leaders’ characteristics described by the participants are that they have adapted quickly and are learning along the way. This indicates what Sukoco et al. (2020) describe as a transformational leadership style, which has shown success in a highly changing environment. Based on these findings, it can be concluded that the adaptiveness of the leaders, in the two banks, has been positive in order to maintain employee engagement.

#### **4.1.2 Clarity**

All of the participants in the interviews point out the challenge of clarity in the instructions due to the pandemic for instance, challenges of the day-to-day changes in regulations. All of the participants acknowledge that it is a hard situation for all, and that with that comes an additional regard to the unclarity. However, the employee DX mentioned that among the employees there existed a desire for more clarity from the management. In line with that thought, BX argued that the management gave too much mandate to the offices to make decisions regarding Covid-related questions, which created uncertainty. DX suggested that it was impossible for management to consider all concerns of the employees if they do not speak up themselves. DX stated:

*But it is better if you have a superior you can have a dialogue with (about concerns), and if you do not take that responsibility, then you somehow have to endure that concern... I think we have had that opportunity anyway.*

In line with this, the leader EX in the same bank argued that she experienced *“that if we need something there are no obstacles for letting them (the management) know.”* In bank Y, similar testimonies were found. BY shared: *“We speak our minds and we experience that the leadership in the bank encourages people to express themselves and their opinions freely.”* Frazier et al. (2016) explained that psychological safety is created where employees can express themselves without any negative consequences of one’s-self image, which is in line with the findings in the banks. In addition, the change in the work environment affects employees.

As mentioned in chapter two, Caligiuri et al. (2020) argue that the sudden change in the work environment can affect employees’ performance and comfort as it increases stress and ambiguity. However, in both banks, the management’s efforts to create psychological safety have created an environment where it is safe to raise opinions and open a dialogue with the superior. The participants experience that this pipeline is open and are using it when needed. None of the participants describes additional stress from not being able to communicate difficulties. As of this, it can be argued that even though the individual responsibility for the communication has increased, it does not seem to have affected the psychological safety experienced by the participants. Therefore, it can be concluded that the clarity in the leadership has not substantially compromised the employee engagement.

It is apparent that the banks have succeeded in their quest to create clarity. Except for the strategy of an open dialogue, they also have been able to clarify what is expected of the employees. Participant CY in bank Y declared that *“you know what you have to conform to, which is very clear and unambiguous.”* Likewise, participant AX in bank X states that *“the company in general has adapted to remote work due to Covid in a clear way.”* Based on Sundaray’s (2011) findings, does this type of leadership drive employee engagement, as it succeeds to communicate the core values of the organisation in a clear and unambiguous way. Additionally, Vercic (2021) argued that the level of engagement among the employees is increasing when it is clear what is expected from them. In addition, Conway et al. (2018) found that work stressor can cause emotional exhaustion and thus, decreasing well-being. Leadership that is clear and unambiguous can help employees feel less stress, hence, increasing well-being and by that, employee engagement.

### 4.1.3 Contact

The general contact with the leader seems to not have become less as a result of the pandemic, it has just become different. In some cases, employees had even experienced closer contact with their superior. Participant BX shared:

*I think that my boss has been very accessible...but I think she now is even more accessible and efficient in her work as she does not have to go to the office. Now she stays at home.*” Similarly, participant CY in bank Y said: *“We have more contact with him because of IT and Teams and all of that, and then we got in closer contact with him, so it has developed in a positive direction (when talking about contact with the leader).*

Moreover, there is contact among the employees. A type of contact that all of the participants agreed on they were missing out on, was the ‘chit-chat by the coffee machine’ what is referred to as non-agenda meetings, the type of conversations that are not ‘necessary’ and that, among other topics, will not be discussed in a digital meeting, yet still have a contributing effect on relationships and well-being among employees. Some even argue “that many important decisions are made in the break room...especially in my line of work” as participant CY did in the interview. The leaders in this study described their different initiatives for simulating this type of contact among the employees. In bank X, the leader (EX) described the situation as decreased well-being among the employees during the weekdays. However, she has noticed that they send each other funny stories and pictures and she argues that *“laughter many times is the key to well-being and managing the engagement.”* As mentioned before, another measure for both banks was to have digital coffee breaks or afterworks to keep the contact and try to create the casual dialogue that otherwise is lost during remote work.

Participant CY in bank Y argued that “it might not arise the same deep conversations as when you go to the coffee machine and so on. However, we reach the main conclusion anyways but in a shorter time. And some topics that might be excluded when you do not meet physically. Some things get lost on the way.” This statement implies that the meetings during the pandemic have become more efficient than before, which other participants also argued, but at the expense of a deeper connection to the colleagues. In turn, it has a negative effect on well-being. In line with that, AY in bank Y states that “many employees feel that they are missing out on the affinity and solidarity as it is not as clear digitally as it is physically.” Furthermore, participant BX argued that *“(well-being) has to do with leadership; to have a dialogue with the*

employees.” “...it is hard to say that we should have additional (strategies)” and refers to that the effort from the management has been doing the best out of the circumstances. Furthermore, the contact with those employees who do not generally occupy centre stage might also be decreased as they might be less likely to do so during working from home.

The opportunities to shy away and not participate as much are increased as a result of the lack of physical presence, flexible hours and digital communication tools. It is in general easier to blend in and not be seen. This can have a negative effect on the well-being of some employees as social support is important to create well-being (Knight et al., 2016). Both of the companies have measures to deal with this situation; the superiors have separate meetings with all employees which tend to focus more on the well-being of the employee than before the pandemic. In these meetings the leader can check up on the employees, in a way that might not have been needed before.

Finally, the leaders that participated in this study have in both banks taken measures to both simulate the ‘chit-chat by the coffee machine’ and preserve the contact that they had with the employees in the office, which are satisfactory for the employees based on the circumstances of the pandemic. These measures have had a positive effect on the engagement among the employees even if it cannot replace the contact that is created from physical presence. The contact during the pandemic has had a positive effect on efficiency but a generally negative effect on well-being.

#### **4.1.4 Information flow**

An important theme of leadership that was found in the interviews is information flow. It refers to the way employees experience the access of information needed to do their job. The leaders play a great role in establishing a functioning line of communication of how knowledge is acquired in order to establish employee engagement (Sundaray, 2011). During remote work, there have appeared some difficulties in the information flow.

The participants state that they are not very concerned about their health at these times. Apparently, the organisations have succeeded in creating a safe environment for those employees that occasionally visit the office. CX is happy with the flow of information and states that “*they (the leaders) send emails if there is someone who has been infected...with details and dates about the person's whereabouts...then you don't have to worry.*” In line with this



statement, AX reveals that *“if something important happens related to Covid-19, the HR department has been very fast to inform everyone to handle for instance spread of the disease.”* Participant BX states that the information acquisition *“is no different now actually...it is as simple as before.”* She continues to argue that it is *“perhaps even easier as people are more used to working digitally.”* This is an indication that the efficiency in the flow of information has been positively affected by the pandemic. In bank Y, one employee argues that the pandemic has led to an increased efficiency in the information flow as *“you have been forced to structure lists etc. that everyone can access. That requirement has not been that clear before instead, then a list might be laying around.”* CY continues by arguing that *“there are folders that everyone can access which has improved productivity and efficiency.”* As mentioned in the previous section, the meetings also have become more efficient while the banks are using digital communication tools.

Participant EX states that *“often other (digital) meetings become very efficient and very head on the topic, and very little chit-chat.”* To make up for the loss of the positive aspects of the chit-chat, bank X arranges other activities that seem appreciated by the employees. *“We try to have ongoing social activities...last Christmas for instance, I made a digital quiz...they had to walk around in the city center”* Another example of activities EX mentioned was walks in the forest while discussing different topics. She argued that these activities helped to preserve the chit-chat.

Participants in both banks state that one obstacle with getting answers to questions immediately by asking a colleague in the office has made it harder to receive answers to simple questions. Participant BX argued that *“it is possible to ask a question to anyone if you need help. But it has become harder as we are not in the office.”* Participant CX stated that *“as we (usually) are sitting four people in the same room, it has been very easy to brainstorm ... and then move on.”* Similarly, CY argued that *“while working from home you do not have the luxury of having a colleague sitting three meters away to just ask the question and get an answer straight away.”* CX said that it to a large extent is because of the fact that you cannot tell how busy someone is. She points out that:

*(Now) you try to avoid, for instance, sending a message on Skype or calling someone. I think it is because when you sit in the same room as someone, you can see that the person is not very busy, in other words, they are not talking on the phone. While using the computer, you cannot tell how busy the person is.*

The fact that it is harder to receive answers on questions could cause a decrease in psychological availability. Being left without answers can create uncertainty and insecurity, which Knight et al., 2016 argued can decrease availability. Furthermore, she also addressed that the technological features of the software cannot compensate for the possibility of determining the status of the colleagues in the office. She said that:

*If I log on to the site, I can see that my colleague is 'green', so then she is available and then I can send her a question. Yet at the same time, I don't know if she is writing something very important as you can be available anyway. We usually do not mark that we are busy just because we edit a document.*

Furthermore, CY argued that “(before) it was easier to receive the affirmation about having the right approach (to something) by just raising the question, which does not work anymore.” This has affected efficiency negatively as more time is forced to be devoted to finding answers to questions that before were very easily accessible. In addition, there is also the aspect of distraction.

Participant CY argued that the fact that you now “have to put on headphones or send an email or chat” can cause interruption in the workflow. He continued to say that:

*One is easily distracted, and it takes about 15 minutes before you are back again. There are many studies that show that these types of interruptions are very wearing, and in my experience, one is not as efficient in the long run.*

Yet, on the other hand does the focus on the work increase while working from home as there are less distractions from other colleagues which in turn has a positive effect on productivity. Participant CY concluded that “the efficiency has declined in general, however, the productivity has gone up.”

Sundaray (2011) argued that a clear line of communication is important to build employee engagement. In both banks the leaders are supportive in the communication and implements an open-door policy. The manager (AY) in bank Y did not experience so much difference in the way he communicated and argued that “the biggest difference is that I call them instead. In the office I walked around and talked to and checked on everyone.” Participant BX stated that she thinks her boss “is even more available and efficient in her work as she does not have to go to the bank. Now she is working from home.” The manager (EX) that was interviewed in bank X described the measures she was using to build a line of communication (which has been previously discussed) and added that “sometimes we have spontaneous meetings. Someone

writes and asks if we can connect to a meeting for five minutes, and then we do that.” This is a strategy where she opens up a pipeline for discussion when the employees need it and thereby creates employee engagement.

#### **4.1.5 Support and care**

Finally, the last second theme under leadership is support and care. Leaders must use leadership that creates trust and support towards employees to make them feel safe and cared about during these uncertain circumstances. Based on the interviews, it stood clear that managers generate support for employees during remote work. *“When I talk (with the boss) during working time about work issues and clients, there is sometimes an element of well-being and matters like that” (Person C, bank Y.)* The employees feel like their managers generate support and the managers explain that they actively support their employees. *We are almost on a colleague level (Rather than employee-boss level) where we both help each other with work issues (Person A, bank X).* *“I think the well-being gets worse by being home all the time” (Person B, bank Y)* which indicates that it is important to display support and care within the banks as well-being have slightly decreased. The managers maintain employee engagement with the usage of support as support positively affects psychological meaningfulness (Gruman and Saks, 2014). This is in line with the findings regarding meaningfulness.

The employees of the banks feel an overall meaningfulness during remote work and support and care can be one drive that supports that fact. Furthermore, Knight et al. (2016) explained that support creates well-being as support is classified as an organisational focus used to enhance well-being and thus, employee engagement.

*We have given them (HR department to upper-level managers) a check-list to follow in order to ensure a safe work environment from a psychosocial and physical perspective so they can take care (of employees) in the best way possible even on distance (BX).*

Well-being is a factor for an engaged and committed workforce and uncertainty can negatively affect well-being (Chillakuri & Vanka 2020). Uncertainty has risen due to remote work and therefore support from managers to employees is a drive used in order to maintain well-being, which is something that the banks apply. In addition, the banks encourage dialogs with managers if someone feels insecure or not well due to the circumstances. *“The bank encourages people to express themselves freely and their emotions” (BY).* Chillakuri and Vanka (2020) explained that human resource management must help organisations to implement practises that

that focus on employees' well-being rather than performance and the support that the banks exhibit is an example of this.

One such practise that has been applied in both banks is the usage of a conversational therapist. *"We have a special group that people can turn to if they feel bad due to the situation. The group offers psychological help"* (BY). *"All personnel have healthcare insurance and within this, we offer conversational therapy (which is highlighted under these circumstances)"* (AX). Offering the opportunity for employees to talk to professionals about concerns regarding the circumstances is a sign of care that the banks offer and an important organisational practice to ensure well-being (Chillakire & Vanka, 2020). However, based on the interview, none of the participants had utilized this.

## **4.2 Autonomy**

Based on the interviews, it is clear that the overall autonomy and freedom of an employee's work has not decreased during remote work but rather increased. Two second order themes connected to autonomy have been identified, namely, it is complicated: self-discipline and feeling of effectiveness and organisational decision-making and flexibility.

### **4.2.1 It is complicated: self-discipline and feeling of effectiveness**

The first second order theme of autonomy refers to "It is complicated: self-discipline and feeling of effectiveness." As people work from home, the autonomy is relatively high as the control from upper-level management is not at the same levels. *"You make more of your own decisions now, as it was easier to ask for others' points of view at the office."* (BY). Autonomy is linked with positive employee engagement as it creates trust (Sundaray, 2011). However, during remote work, as the job control has slightly decreased compared to before the pandemic, the discipline and effectiveness among employees have been affected differently. Some employees feel like they are not as effective in remote work as in the office. Furthermore, it is clear that some employees feel that it is a hard time to stop working.

*"It feels like some people think working from home is magical while some do not take any breaks, they just continue to work."* (CY), which indicates that employees have a tendency to "over work" at home. They explain that when you leave the office you are done for the day, but at home the work computer is always there. The increased working hours or the decrease in effectiveness relates to the work-life balance that has been affected by remote work. *"When we*

*discuss what is difficult, (with remote work) it is that the working hours and free time floats together.*” (EX). Caligiuri et al (2020) highlighted that due to the involuntary transit to work from home, the WLB can be negatively affected. Furthermore, the authors argued that the line between home life and work life can be blurry due remote work during the pandemic. This is the apparent case for employees at the two banks. Some employees have increased their working hours due to remote work which is in lines with the findings of Caligiuri et al (2020). Nevertheless, some people have been positively affected. *“I think I deliver just as much if not more now (During remote work).”* (DX).

Based on the interviews, a clear way of handling the problem that some might work too much were not found. This supports the findings of Wang et al. (2020) as they stated that managers might not have had the time and resources to establish the right arrangements for autonomy to affect WLB. Nevertheless, the upper-level manager of Bank Y explains that they hand out economical compensations in order for employees to build up a comfortable home office. *“The bank offers everyone (Compensation) to build up your own home office.”* (BY). Bank X lets employees bring home office furniture and digital means such as screens to have a home office. *“You are allowed to take home office goods (To make your home office comfortable).”* (AX). This is a tool to maintain and build effectiveness among the employees. The autonomy during remote work has affected employees differently but by offering to help build up a comfortable home office, the banks seek to maintain efficiency, which has been enhanced for some employees.

Despite long working days and lower levels of efficiency that some employees experience, others feel that their work-life balance has improved which reflects on why some have enhanced their efficiency. *“A lot of people already feel safe. Some people think this is quite good and a lot of time can be saved.”* (BY). *“For me with three hours of commuting and three kids, I save quite a lot of time with this (Working from home).”* (DY). It is clear that this is a rather individual issue and therefore any larger assumptions cannot be made about WLB, as people have different opinions of how their WLB has been affected.

#### **4.2.2 Organisational decision-making and flexibility.**

The final second order theme connected to autonomy is decision-making and flexibility. Decision-making refers to the influence that employees have on organisational decisions and flexibility refers to the freedom of working from home. Organisational decision making has not

been affected by remote work. *“There is no big difference in how (organisational) decisions are made during the pandemic.”* (AY). Indeed, because of the fact that people work remotely, the influence that employees have on organisational decisions might have decreased a bit at the banks. *“When you work from home the chance to affect (organisational) decisions is perhaps a bit lower.”* (AY). This can cause some sort of ambiguity and uncertainty for the employees. At the office it is easier to get a hold on quick information and affect decisions, and it is clear that this has in a sense disappeared during remote work. On the other hand, based on the interviews, it is not considered a big problem and as mentioned earlier, upper-level managers do not have the time nor the resources to help with every problem. Although no major assumptions of the effect of a slightly less employee participation volume in the organisational decision-making process, it can relate back to emotional commitment towards the banks. Emotional commitment can be created when employees feel a deep connection and belonging to the organisations (Huang, Ma and Meng, 2018). However, as the banks have not made any drastic change in including employees in the process of organisational decisions despite the uncertainty that is remote work, the sense of connection and belonging might decrease in the long run and thus, employee engagement. Therefore, in the long run, it might become a problem if the banks do not account for employee input and influence on organisational decisions. Nevertheless, as employees work from home, they have more time to plan their own time.

As the influence on organisational decisions has slightly decreased, the freedom and flexibility of an employees’ working hours have increased because of the autonomy from remote work. *“You can be more flexible with your time.”* (Person C, bank Y). Perhaps the most positive thing about remote work is the flexibility and freedom employees feel. *“You don’t have to drive several miles in the morning and afternoon, and you can put on the laundry whenever.”* (CX). Employees have the flexibility to structure their days in their own suitable way in order to find balance. Employees who exploit the flexibility and freedom have the opportunity to maintain a good WLB. Cain et al. (2018) argued that a beneficial WLB will create energy and satisfaction, which can be achieved if employees exploit their flexibility.

### **4.3 Internal communication**

Based on the interviews, three second order themes have been identified that are connected to internal communication, these are non-agenda meetings, acknowledgement during, how it is to work remotely during Covid-19.

### 4.3.1 Non-agenda meetings

The first second order theme connected to internal communication is non-agenda meetings. As people have transitioned into remote work, the way of communicating within the organisation has become more digitized. The way of communicating is screen to screen instead of face to face with the use of digital programs such as teams. *“We had digital (communication) solutions in March last year as they sent around 90% home”* (DY). Furthermore, internal communication such as small talk around the office has disappeared due to remote work. It is clear that the lack of social gathering has affected the employees. Based on the interviews, the two banks have encouraged their employees to hold no-agenda meetings over the program Teams which is used to connect, communicate and maintain employee engagement during remote work. This can increase psychological safety.

Gruman and Saks (2014) found that in order to increase psychological safety, the social environment and interpersonal relationship is important. Therefore, as this bank promotes these kinds of meetings in order to maintain the social networking during remote work and such a behaviour supports the findings Gruman and Saks (2014). This strategy can be used to enhance psychological safety at the bank and thus employee engagement. The majority of the people interviewed at this bank were positive to these non-agenda meetings, solely for the social perspective. *We in the HR departments have come closer to them (HR department) as we have coffee breaks (via Teams).”* (BX). These meetings are used as a way of communicating internally in order to maintain engagement and a sense of belonging. Another employee stated, *“Even though you don’t have the daily small talk (as in the office) it (digital meeting) still creates some sort of social connection.”* (DX). This indicates that the non-agenda meeting operates as a tool to maintain social belonging. Furthermore, this supports what Chanana and Sangeeta (2020) found, as a sense of a safe social environment and a sense of belonging can increase well-being. Moreover, Vercic, 2021 explained that engagement can be increased when people are emotionally in contact with each other. Non-agenda meetings can be encouraged as they allow employees to, primarily, connect emotionally as work-related topics are not the main priority. Therefore, it can be argued that the two banks have exploited non-agenda meetings to maintain employee engagement.

### **4.3.2 Acknowledgement during remote work**

The second, second order theme related to internal communication is acknowledgment during remote work. During remote work, internal communication is of importance to maintain engagement as employees work on their own. Promoting acknowledgement, such as feedback, and staying in contact via different forums is a way the two banks use to connect and communicate and thus, to maintain employee engagement. After the interviews it is clear that, even though employees work more independently, employees feel the need to be in contact and receive feedback for their work and set objectives. *“We have created a competition within the bank where you get points if you do, for example, squats or say make a colleague happy by being positive.”* (EX). The banks encourage not only upper-level management to provide feedback but also employees to one another. Feedback and social support tend to increase well-being and motivation which is of most importance for organisations (Chanana & Sangeeta, 2020). This is exactly what the two banks use as a strategy to maintain employee engagement. Moreover, feedback can increase meaningfulness.

As Gruman and Saks (2014) argued, feedback can increase the meaningfulness of an employee's work. *“It (My work) is just as meaningful, absolutely.”* (CY) *“Yes, I really believe so (That people feel their work is just as meaningful).”* (BX) No one that was interviewed explained that their work felt less meaningful during remote work, and the managers interviewed did not think that their employees felt that their work had had a change in meaningfulness. In addition, job control can be used in order to maintain meaningfulness (Gruman and Saks, 2014). *“There is a checklist included, where managers can check (work-related issues) with their employees.”* This indicates that Bank X promotes regular check-ins with their employees during remote work which is in line with the findings of Gruman and Saks (2014).

### **4.3.3 How it is to work remotely during Covid-19.**

The third second order theme connected to internal communication is referred to “how it is to work remotely during the Covid-19 pandemic.” The fact that the internal communication has happened over screens has had its impact on employees and managers. It is evident that some workers have experienced an increase in fatigue and loneliness due to remote work and banks’ ways of internal communication. *“It is a kind of tiredness that I haven’t experienced before.”* participant CY said. Sitting alone, communication through a screen has had its impact. Gupta



and Sharma (2016) explained that focus and energy increases emotional commitment, however fatigue decreases employee focus and energy, hence remote work can decrease emotional commitment. Lack of emotional commitment can be negative for the organisations as whole. Moreover, psychological availability can be affected by fatigue and loneliness. Psychological resources are important to achieve availability and fatigue can be a factor that negatively affects employees' psychological resources. "*You don't get the same energy*" (*In remote work compared to office work*).” (CY). This quote strengthens the argument that some employees feel less energized due to remote work.

Furthermore, the lack of energy that fatigue can cause decreases psychological availability. Nevertheless, the bank promotes solutions that are used to maintain psychological availability and emotional commitment. For example, one bank offers motivational guest lectures as a solution to the problem. An upper-level manager in bank Y argued: "*We have guest lectures that talk about motivation and matters like that (well-being)*." Furthermore, in bank X, they have had a comedian visiting. "*The bank has arranged some fun lectures, for example a comedian to make people laugh and feel better. I think it is to keep engagement up*." (EX). Both emotional commitment and psychological availability are strengthened by motivation. Therefore, these kinds of lectures are used by the banks in order to maintain commitment and availability that has been affected due to remote work. Binyamin and Carmeli (2010) argued that human resource processes are important to achieve availability and it is evident that the banks have used motivational lectures as a process and tool to maintain availability. Moreover, loneliness is an outcome from remote work.

Despite no agenda meetings there is still a sense of loneliness while working remotely within the banks, based on the interviews. "*Sometimes you can feel quite lonely*." (AY). However, in order to communicate efficiently within the banks, the banks promote an open door-policy in order for employees to communicate and express concerns. The open-door policy works as a tool within the internal organisation to avoid loneliness and decrease uncertainty if people feel the need to express concerns. However, as the communication is online via programmes such as teams, the steps of getting in contact with someone is longer compared to the office. "*You live in a world of Teams meetings and can't meet physically*." (CY). Nevertheless, an upper-level manager in bank X said, "*Employees can talk to whoever they want no matter what position*" and an upper-level manager in bank Y explained an encouraging family atmosphere, "*We have a family atmosphere*.", which reflects the use of an open-door policy.

Not only can an open-door policy be of use to decrease loneliness, but it can be used to enhance psychological safety within the banks. Gruman and Saks (2014) argued that interpersonal relationships can be used in order to maintain a feeling of safety at the company, and this is exactly what the banks are doing, with the encouragement of an open-door policy. In addition, an open-door policy encourages employees to express emotions regarding the pandemic and thus creating a sense of coherence which can increase employee engagement. This is what Caligiuri et al (2020), pointed out, that employees can bond over the pandemic. Although one employee stated that *“I think it (open-door policy) has become a bit worse as you are not in the office where there are a lot of people you can quickly have a word with.”* (AY) which indicates that perhaps more can be done to establish an open-door policy. Moreover, Bank X provides activities to decrease loneliness. *“We try to keep social activities going and, for example, we had a digital quiz walk during Christmas.”* (EX). These activities can increase a sense of belonging and social contacts which can maintain well-being and psychological safety (Chanana & Sangeeta, 2020; Gruman & Saks, 2014).

#### **4.4 Job security**

As mentioned before, job insecurity is the general concern about one’s job (van Schalkwyk et al., 2010). The majority of the participants argued that they felt their job was secured and that these feelings had not changed from before the pandemic. Participant AX in bank X argued: *“I feel very secure in myself. The bank is doing good and is properly run. So, it is a secure employer...I know what I am doing and what I contribute.”* According to AX, these feelings created engagement.

##### **4.4.1 Banking industry**

There are many reasons why employees can experience job insecurity. Some of those reasons can arise from the general climate within the industry. In both banks, the participants argued that the job security they were experiencing was a result of the banking industry. CY declared that *“there is employment security to work in a bank. You are needed in all situations (economically good and bad times).”* In line with this, AX said that *“banks do not fire people because of small things.”* suggesting that banks in general are very secure employers. DY also confirmed that *“it has not changed since the pandemic actually. Banks are banks. (Referred to the secure banking industry).”* In accordance, BX stated that she feels very confident in her job: *“I work at one of Sweden’s best and safest workplaces.”* BX feels that her job will remain and

that those feelings have not changed due to the pandemic. Other participants experience different feelings due to reorganisations that are usual within the industry.

Based on the findings, there were some participants that stated that some reasons for concern about their job was the bigger structural changes within the bank. DY argued that a closedown of the department of private affairs had caused worries among employees, however, she added that it was not a result of the pandemic rather other factors affecting the industry. Similarly, DX argued that the feelings of security have not changed due to the pandemic. She said:

*I have a very good dialogue with people around me. We talk from time to time about what is happening. We recently had a reorganisation and there was a concern about whether or not our group would disappear, but it has not.*

#### **4.4.2 Role of remote work**

As previously mentioned, the general feelings of job security for most of the participants did not seem to have been affected by the pandemic. However, some participants experienced a difference from before working from home.

Many of the participants are very confident in their role at the bank. For instance, AX argued that he knows what he is doing and what he is contributing. Similarly, DX stated: *“I have come to the conclusion that I work and do my best and I cannot do anything more than that. If the bank is not happy with that, then so be it. I am not going to worry about that.”* She continued to argue that those feelings have not changed due to the pandemic. In accordance with this, CY said that he experiences a sense of security in his job: *“I did before, and I do now.”*

However, the findings suggest that some have experienced feelings of insecurity due to remote work. Participant CX argued that even if she feels safe both to work with what she does and to work from home and not get infected, which has not something that has changed by the pandemic, she stated: *“One can feel a shortcoming while working from home...when you work together you receive confirmation if you have the right approach...but not in the same way while staying at home.”* This statement suggests that the enforced remote work due to the pandemic has caused some insecurities among some employees. When asked if that could have something to do with the fact that you now cannot compare how much you get done to other’s accomplishments, she agreed and gave an example of doing work that does not produce visible results. *“It affects the line of thought...what will the boss think?”* She argues that she becomes less efficient while working from home. *“If you are at work, there is nothing else that*

*interrupts.*” She feels that home life gets in the way. *“If you are logging your hours, you can see that you do your time; however, it might not feel that way (while working from home).”* The leader in bank X seemed aware of these insecurities among the employees. She stated: *“I think that we (leaders) have been forced to give even more autonomy (to the employees) as we cannot see what they are doing during the workdays.”* She feels that surely there are employees in need of more positive and constructive feedback while working from home. She argues that *“making them (the employees) laugh a little more makes them feel sufficient, to keep in touch.”* Additionally, to tackle the insecurity she argued that her strategy was to discuss it and try to remove some of the feelings of guilt. Otherwise, there was not much she could do about it.

On the contrary, participant AX argued: *“We are specialists...and we work a lot together. We have superiors that do not know what we know so we have to tell them how certain things have to be done.”* This indicates that the feelings of insecurity caused by remote work might be more common among employees that usually have less job autonomy. AX argued that *“having little need for the boss and taking care of oneself”* creates engagement.

## **4.5 The Future of Remote Work**

After a review of the data based on the interviews it is evident that remote work will be part of future business. However, most employees and upper-level managers stressed that it will most likely be some kind of hybrid-remote work where personnel work both remote but as well in the office. *“I don’t think employers think it is okay to sit at home all five days during the week, but perhaps some form of fifty-fifty.”* (AX). Foss (2020) argued that the on-site work scenario will not return to its former propositions and that a new normal will occur. The employees of the bank agree with Foss, based on the data. *“Judging now, it will be a combination of both office work and remote work. Right now, we see a future of working two or three days for one place and then change.”* (AY).

Mentioned earlier, flexibility and freedom are one advantage of remote work. Another advantage is the fact that companies can decrease costs of office space as the need for office space will decrease if more people work remotely. *“We might not need as much office space so we can save on costs.”* (AY). Office premises are a high cost for organisations, hence working remotely can cause organisations to lower this cost. As there are advantages that can be gained in the future in remote work situations, disadvantages can also occur.

One problem can be the fact that new employees can have a hard time to be a social part of the organisation if he or she works remotely from the beginning. In this case the new employee will not meet his or her colleagues face to face, thus, it will be hard to get to know one another and create bonds. *“I think it is hard for new employees to join a new workplace if everybody sits at home, in that case you should have higher attendance at the office.”* (CY). Such a scenario will make it hard for the new employee to form social connections and relations. According to Chanana and Sangeeta (2020) as well as Gruman and Saks (2014) this could result in a decrease in well-being and psychological safety. *“We will never be able to work from home (completely) right now. Perhaps if the technology changes, but right now we must use the firewalls in the office to deal with client data.”* (BX). This indicates that working completely remotely in the future is not an option, however the possibility of a hybrid office-remote work situation is more than possible in the current situation and most likely the future of business. Nevertheless, this new futural office-remote work situation requires drivers that can maintain and ensure employee engagement.

## 5. Conclusion

To conclude the findings of how enforced remote work during Covid-19 affects employee engagement show that the overall employee engagement has slightly decreased. Loneliness, fatigue, less energy, uncertainty and less effectiveness are the most highlighted outcomes that employees have felt during remote work. In addition, well-being has decreased for some employees. According to Gupta and Sharma (2016) less energy and fatigue can decrease emotional commitment, but based on the interviews, no evidence can be found that participants feel less committed to their organisation. Moreover, psychological safety and psychological availability have slightly decreased due to an increase in the feelings of loneliness, less energy and uncertainty. However, based on the data, employees still feel like the meaningfulness of their work has not been affected, and participants feel secure and safe regarding their jobs. Furthermore, WLB has been affected differently among the participants. The lines between work life and family life have a tendency to become blurry due to remote work (Caligiuri et al.,2020). Some employees feel more flexibility, more effectiveness and a sense of freedom and thus, they have exploited this in order to create a good WLB. On the contrary, others feel less effective and that the work has increased when working remotely, which is in line with the findings of Caligiuri et al. (2020). Nevertheless, in order to maintain employee engagement, different themes that drive employee engagement have been identified.

Most of the strategies that have been used to maintain an engaged workforce can be connected to the drive of leadership. Based on the findings leaders have adapted their leadership due remote work in order to maintain engagement among employees. Furthermore, clarity is vital for leaders to exhibit in their leadership. The reason for this is to decrease ambiguity and uncertainty that have occurred due to remote work. In addition, leaders must encourage contact and a clear information flow during remote work in order to decrease ambiguity and uncertainty and increase employee engagement. Moreover, leaders exhibit support and care in order to maintain well-being. Working remotely requires new responsibility from leaders to show their support and care towards employees and they do so by, for example, promoting employees to express their emotions and encourage the opportunity to talk with professionals. Moreover, there are several other implementations that are used by the banks that drive employee engagement. One such implementation is non-agenda meetings, which is used to increase psychological safety and a sense of social belonging. Another one is acknowledgement during work in the form of feedback and, as mentioned earlier, the importance of contact. Furthermore,

the bank has regular digital work-related check-ins, which reflects the fact that employees feel that their work is meaningful. Moreover, both banks use motivational and fun lectures as a drive to increase motivation and well-being. The banks promote an open-door policy to make sure employees feel safe to express concerns and questions, which also relates back to support and care. Both of the banks help employees to build up a comfortable and suiting home office. Bank Y offers economical compensation and bank X allows personnel to bring office supplies and furniture back home. These solutions are used in order to help employees to maintain a beneficial work-life balance.

Finally, it is evident that, despite the effect that remote work has on employee engagement, remote work is a part of future business. However, it will most likely occur in the form of a hybrid remote-office work where people work both from home and in the office. Nevertheless, organisational drivers are vital in order to maintain employee engagement as remote work clearly has affected employee engagement.

## **5.1 Contribution**

This thesis contributes with knowledge of how to maintain employee engagement during remote work as a response to the Covid-19 pandemic; findings that might be valuable for organisations that make digital transitions in the future. The thesis gives an in-depth review of what concepts that employee engagement consists of. It is apparent that leadership plays an important role in maintaining employee engagement. In addition, this study presents drivers that are used to increase effectiveness and motivation and decrease uncertainty and ambiguity. Hence, this thesis features strategies that perhaps, not only can be used to maintain employee engagement, but decrease uncertainty and ambiguity in other contexts than to employee engagement during remote work. Furthermore, this thesis contributes to knowledge of remote work in future business and perhaps how to maintain employee engagement during other uncertain circumstances that differ from remote work.

## **5.2 Limitation**

This thesis is not without its limitations. The model accounts for four major concepts connected to employee engagement and four major concepts connected to the drivers of employee engagement. However, there might be other valuable aspects of employee engagement that are not accounted for in the model. Furthermore, the thesis is based on two banks and does not

account for other industries. Nine interviews were used and thus, any large substantial assumptions cannot be made. The findings are limited to the interviewees' opinions and feelings. Moreover, this study does not account for what kind of organisational drivers were used before the pandemic within the banks, only the ones that were affected, encouraged and promoted as a result of the pandemic. Lastly, this study does not account for the long-term effect of remote work on employee engagement as remote work has only been used for approximately one year.

### **5.3 Future research**

This study has been exclusively conducted with the use of two companies within the same industry. In future research it might be valuable to explore other industries. Further, future research ought to focus on the long-term effect of remote work. Some sort of remote work might be the new normal in the future, for instance a combination of the two. To study its effects on employee engagement and perhaps business overall, could result in valuable information and practical implications. Finally, longitudinal studies during a transition to remote work measuring before, during and after might yield more precise insights into what actual affect the drivers have on employee engagement.



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# Appendix 1- Interview guide one

## Interview guide one (Upper-level managers)

1. Hur har ni anpassat (lite generellt) er pga Covid situationen utifrån att vissa jobbar hemifrån?
2. Vad är ditt arbetsansvar?
3. Hur stor del jobbar hemifrån och hur har det generellt påverkat folk?
4. Hur upprätthåller ni kommunikationen med medarbetare som jobbar utanför kontoret? exempel?
5. Forskning visar på att Covid-19 situationen och att folk måste jobba hemifrån kan skapa osäkerhet och stress, vilket i sin tur kan påverka arbetarnas engagemang. Hur har ni arbetat för att de anställda ska känna sig stolta för jobba och känna tillhörighet till just er arbetsplats? Hur exakt? exempel?
6. Hur arbetar ni och vilka strategier har ni för att arbetarna ska känna att deras jobb är meningsfullt under Covid-19 och när de jobbar utanför kontoret?
7. Hur arbetar ni för att arbetare ska kunna känna tryggheten att uttrycka sina åsikter om till exempel arbets-förändringar som gjorts p.g.a Covid-19?
8. Hur arbetar ni för att medarbetare ska känna att de har de mentala resurserna och engagemanget i sin arbetsroll under dessa förhållanden?
9. Välmående är extremt viktigt för att upprätthålla jobb-engagement. Välmående på jobbet relaterar till stressfaktorer som påverkar hälsan och känslomässig utmattning. Forskning visar på att välmående ökar engagemanget och arbetsprestation. Vad har ni anpassat för strategier för att upprätthålla eller kanske till och med öka välmåendet bland era anställda utifrån coronas osäkerhet och att folk jobbar hemifrån?
10. Work-life balance är ett koncept som uttrycker det viktiga med att hitta en balans mellan familjeliv och jobbliv. Hur tror ni att folk jobbar hemifrån har påverkat work-life balance bland era anställda och hur arbetar ni för att era anställda ska en bra balans mellan familjeliv och arbetsliv under dessa förhållanden och på så sätt skapa engagemang?
11. Hur arbetar ni för att de anställda ska känna sig delaktiga i företagsbeslut som kan påverka dem?
12. Vad skulle ni säga är de generellt stora skillnaderna i hur ni hanterar och upprätthåller arbetarnas jobb-engagemang före corona och under corona utifrån att folk inte finns på plats?
13. Hur tror ni framtiden ser ut? Kommer det bli en ny standard att folk jobbar hemifrån eller kommer det att återgå till hur det såg ut före corona? Varför?
14. Vilket stöd ger du dina anställda som är annorlunda sedan innan pandemin?
15. Känner du tillit till dina anställda? Kan du ge exempel?
16. Ger du dina anställda mer självbestämmande över sitt arbete i jämförelse med innan pandemin? Exempel?
17. Är hemarbete något som ert företag har långsiktigt strävat efter? I så fall varför?
18. Vilka förutsättningarna har de anställda haft för att jobba hemma och hur tror du att dessa har påverkat situationen för de anställda?
- På vilket sätt tror du att det kunde ha varit annorlunda om övergången hade varit mer successiv?
  19. Känner du att det finns en open door policy på företaget? Har den förändrats sedan pandemin? I så fall hur?
  20. Vad gör du för att uppmuntra dina anställda till kommunikation?

21. Vad gör företaget för att utveckla de anställda?
22. Har pandemin orsakat någon förändring i de möjligheter som kan erbjudas de anställda?
23. Hur ser det ut på företaget när det kommer till jämlikhet?
24. Vad gör du för att dina anställda ska känna sig trygga under rådande omständigheter?
- Har du märkt en förändring hos de anställda när det kommer till känslor kring trygghet och hälsa?
  25. Hur har ditt ledarskap förändrats under pandemin?
  26. Hur har du anpassat ditt ledarskap till förändring i de anställdas privatliv?
  27. Vilka fördelar och nackdelar upplever du med att de anställda jobbar hemifrån?
  28. Hur har de anställdas produktivitet och effektivitet påverkats av att jobba hemifrån?
  29. Hur har kommunikationen inom företaget påverkats av pandemin?

## Appendix 2 - Interview guide two

### Interview guide two (employees)

1. Hur känner ni att företaget har anpassat sig utifrån Covid-19 och att folk jobbar utanför kontoret? Har det skett på ett bra sätt? Hur känns det generellt att jobba mycket hemifrån och hur påverkar er jobb engagemang?
2. Forskning visar på att Covid-19 situationen och att folk måste jobba hemifrån kan skapa osäkerhet och stress, vilket i sin tur kan påverka arbetarnas engagemang. Vilka strategier tycker ni att företaget har gjort för att ni och andra arbetare ska känna starkt tillhörighet för företaget under dessa förhållanden? Fungerar det bra?
3. Känner ni att ert arbete är extra eller mindre meningsfull när ni jobbar hemifrån och känner ni trygghet att uttrycka era åsikter angående företagsförändringar som har tagits under Corona? Har de påverkat ert jobb engagemang på något sätt?
4. Känner du att företaget bryr sig om ert välmående under dessa tider när folk jobbar hemifrån och isåfall vilka typer av strategier har de använt sig av för att upprätthålla och skapa välmåendet genom att minska stress samt osäkerhet?
5. Work-life balance är ett koncept som uttrycker det viktiga med att hitta en balans mellan familjeliv och jobbliv. Forskning visar på att det är viktigt att upprätthålla en god work-life balance för sitt jobb engagemang. Har ert work-life balance påverkats av situationen att man jobbar hemifrån och tror ni att andra kollegor har påverkats och i så fall på vilket sätt? Känner ni att företaget har bidragit med strategier för att upprätthålla er work-life balance och vad för strategier?
6. Visar era chefer på bra eller mindre bra ledarskap under denna pandemi och på vilket sätt?
7. Känner ni anställda att ni är delaktiga i företagsbeslut som på olika sätt påverkar er när ni jobbar hemifrån? Är det någon skillnad gentemot innan corona?
8. Hur fungerar den interna kommunikationen i företaget mellan folk som jobbar hemifrån och folk som är på plats och mellan anställda och chefer? Finns det något som kan förbättras?
9. Känner ni att jobba utanför kontoret kan påverka eller har påverkat er karriärmässiga jobbutveckling? Tror ni generellt att en persons karriär och jobb utveckling påverkas negativt eller positivt av att inte jobba på plats.
10. Känner ni att jobba hemifrån skapar samma jämställdhet och trygghet som innan corona? Hur tycker ni att företaget har agerat för att ni anställda ska känna jämställdhet och trygghet under corona?
11. Hur tror ni framtiden kommer se ut? Tror ni att man kan skapa jobb engagemang bland anställda när folk jobbar utanför kontoret på samma sätt som när folk jobbar i kontoret? Kan man kanske till och med skapa mer jobb engagement när folk jobbar hemifrån?
12. Känner du en trygghet kring ditt jobb? Har de känslorna förändrats sedan pandemin?
13. Hur har dina tankar kring din hälsa påverkats av pandemin? Känner du oro? I så fall varför?
14. Hur ser det ut på företaget när det kommer till jämlikhet?
15. Hur känner du kring dina möjligheter inom företaget? Känns det som att de har förändrats sedan pandemin?
16. Känner du att du utvecklas? Är det någon skillnad i din utveckling sedan pandemin? Kan du ge några exempel?
17. Får du som anställd någon typ av utbildning? Har det förändrats sedan pandemin? I så fall hur?

18. Hur har utbildningen påverkat dig? (Ditt humör, självkänsla, prestation)
19. Känner du att du lätt får all information du behöver för att kunna utföra ditt arbete på ett effektivt sätt? Är det någon skillnad sen innan pandemin?
20. Känner du att det finns en open door policy på företaget? Har den förändrats sedan pandemin? I så fall hur?
21. Känner du att du har sägande i beslut som berör dig inom företaget?
22. Känner du att du har fått mer självbestämmande över ditt arbete i jämförelse med innan pandemin?
  - Hur har det i så fall påverkat dig?
    23. Hur ser du på din självdisciplin efter den här situationen?
    24. Känner du att tilliten från din chef har påverkats när du jobbar hemma?
    25. Hur har stödet från din chef förändrats sedan innan pandemin?
    26. Har ditt privatliv påverkats av pandemin? I så fall hur?
  - Hur har detta påverkat ditt arbete?
  - Hur har din chef bemött detta?
    27. Vilka fördelar och nackdelar upplever du med att jobba hemifrån?
    28. Hur har din produktivitet och effektivitet påverkats av att av att jobba hemifrån?
    29. Hur har din trivsel på jobbet påverkats under pandemin?
    30. Hur har dina chefers produktivitet och effektivitet påverkats av pandemin, ur ditt perspektiv? Kan du ge exempel?
    31. Hur har kommunikationen inom företaget påverkats av pandemin?

## Appendix 3 - Participants

### Participants.

| Bank X             | Participants        | Bank Y             | Participants        |
|--------------------|---------------------|--------------------|---------------------|
| Participant A (AX) | Employee            | Participant A (AY) | Upper-level Manager |
| Participant B (BX) | HR-representative   | Participant B (BY) | Employee            |
| Participant C (CX) | Employee            | Participant C (CY) | Employee            |
| Participant D (DX) | Employee            | Participant D (DY) | Employee            |
| Participant E (EX) | Upper-level Manager |                    |                     |



## Appendix 4 – Data-coding of Quotes

### Data-coding by the use of quotes.

| 1st order concepts   | 2nd order themes | Quotes   |
|----------------------|------------------|--|
| <b>1. Leadership</b> | 1.1 Adaptiveness | <p>“I have a new boss due to a reorganization. He (the new boss) is easier to deal with in any way and he is used to having employees working from home... He has been checking with us what we want our relationship to look like and so forth, and then adapted to that. It is working really well. He is accessible for quick decisions” DY</p> <p>“There is always room for improvement; however, one must respect the situation (pandemic). The leaders have done what they thought was best from the beginning and then learnt along the way about for instance communication and clarity in regards to the new circumstances”. BX</p> <p>“I think they (the leaders) have been very good as they dealt with it as soon as it started (the pandemic).” CX</p> <p>Leader: “The leadership in itself might not have changed; however, the way to exert it in a digital way has been forced to change it. One (as a leader) has to accept not to be able to have the connection and insight (as before) and to feel comfortable with it.” EX</p> <p>“He (the new boss) has behaved excellently, but he would have otherwise as well..”CY</p> <p>“I can not see a change in the leadership, it has been both good and bad.” AX</p>   |
|                      | 1.2 Clarity      | <p>“I think that there were expectations in the offices to receive exact instructions as one is very insecure during a pandemic...so they (the management) gave a little too much mandate to the offices in certain questions to make decisions on their own, which created insecurity.”BX</p> <p>“But it is better if you have a superior you can have a dialogue with (about concerns), and if you do not take that responsibility, then you somehow have to endure that concern... I think we have had that opportunity anyway.”DX</p> <p>“My boss has a type of leadership that is based on that we (subordinates) express if we feel that something is not working and have an open dialogue, and from that perspective I think that she (the boss) has done what I expect of her. I know that there are others who have expected something else, which is so extremely different depending on the person.” DX</p> <p>“We use speak our minds and we experience that the leadership in the bank encourage people to express themselves and their opinions freely” BY</p> <p>“What you know is what you have to conform to, which is very clear and unambiguous.” CY</p> <p>“And I think the company in general has adapted to remote work due to covid in a clear way”. AX</p> <p>“The strategy might not have been so clear, but it is clear that we have succeeded very well either way.” AY (about well-being)</p> <p>“I experience that if we need something there are no obstacles for letting them (the management) know.” EX</p> |

|  |                             |   |
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|  | <p>1.3 Contact</p>          | <p>“I think that my boss has been very accessible...but I think she now is even more accessible and efficient in her work as she does not have to go to the office. Now she stays at home.” BX</p> <p>“I think that people who did not occupy center stage in the office, will be less likely to do so while working from home. No, it depends on the leader; in physical meetings in the office and everyone was present... you did not have to say anything if you did not want to. However, in Teams-meetings for instance...you cannot get away...and if you have a good boss you might ask the question to one by one...and then it is harder to get away. However, outside the meetings when you are sitting at home it is easier to get away and do something else for a couple of hours. No one can see if you are not logged on, there can be 1000 reasons why you are not logged on.” CY</p> <p>“So for instance, in my group we have a digital coffee break every day which is very good...”EX</p> <p>“We had more contact with him because of IT and Teams and all of that, and then we got in closer contact with him, so it has developed in a positive direction.” CY “Furthermore, it might not arise the same deep conversations as when you go to the coffee machine and so on. However, we reach the main conclusion anyways but in a shorter time. And some topics that might be excluded when you do not meet physically. Some things get lost on the way.”CY</p> <p>“Everyone knows it has been hard to have the day to day dialogue about both work related and private things...” AX</p> <p>“It has to do with leadership (while talking about well-being) to have a dialogue with the employees.” “...it is hard to say that we should have additional (strategies)” BX</p> <p>“There could be clearer checklists...if someone is not feeling well. there could be checkpoints that the superiors could be observant about. It could be a good idea to structure the feedback clearer for the superiors who have subordinates working from home” AX (about well-being)</p> <p>“Many employees feel that they are missing out on the affinity and solidarity as it is not as clear digitally as it is physically”AY (koppling till välmående genom kontakt)</p> <p>“I have pushed for the importance of the informal meeting, for instance a digital afterwork. I think it is important to gather even if it is not a formal meeting. There is no need for an agenda.” AX</p> <p>“When you are not meeting (the subordinates) in the hallway, you need to have a checklist to go through so that you do not forget about anyone. Usually the ones who do not get in touch are the lone wolves who do not need the team that much” AY</p> <p>“What we have done is to call each employee continuously, not every week, but from time to time...and it becomes a checkup”. AY</p> |
|  | <p>3.4 Information flow</p> | <p>“It is no different now actually. I think it is as simple as before. Perhaps even easier as people are more used to working digitally” (About acquiring information) BX</p> <p>“If something important happens related to covid-19, the HR department has been very fast to inform everyone to handle for instance spread of the disease.” AX</p> <p>“We receive current information...” “They do a great job at informing.” “They (the leaders) send emails if there is someone who has been infected...with details and dates about the person's whereabouts...then you don't have to worry” CX</p> <p>“I want to say that it is much better (the information flow). It has been positively affected by the pandemic, as you have been forced to structure lists</p>   |

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|  |                             | <p>etc. that everyone can access. That requirement has not been that clear before instead, then a list might be laying around.”</p> <p>“The structure in the flow of information has been positively affected by the pandemic, there are folders that everyone can access which has improved productivity and efficiency.” CY</p> <p>“often other (digital) meetings become very efficient and very head on the topic, and very little chit-chat.” EX</p> <p>“It feels like it (the activities) helped (to preserve the chit-chat).” EX</p> <p>“As we (usually) are sitting four people in the same room, it has been very easy to brainstorm ... and then move on.” “(Now) you try to avoid for instance to send a message on Skype or call someone” “I think it is because when you sit in the same room as someone, you can see that the person is not very busy, in other words, they are not talking on the phone. While using the computer, you can not tell how busy the person is.” CX</p> <p>“If I log on to the site, I can see that my colleague is 'green', so then she is available and then I can send her a question. Yet at the same time, I don't know if she is writing something very important as you can be available anyway. We usually do not mark that we are busy just because we edit a document.” CX</p> <p>“While doing some analyses it is easy to get stuck and then might be in need of a five minute discussion, asking a little question or receiving some input to be able to think in a different way. While working from home you do not have the luxury of having a colleague sitting three meters away to just ask the question and get an answer straight away. Now you have to put on headphones or send an email or chat.”</p> <p>“One is easily distracted and it takes about 15 minutes before you are back again. There are many studies that show that these types of interruptions are very wearing, and in my experience one is not as efficient in the long run.” CY</p> <p>“(Before) it was easier to receive the affirmation about having the right approach (to something) by just raising the question, which does not work anymore.” CY</p> <p>“The efficiency has declined in general, however, the productivity has gone up. Generally, you do not get the answers as easily as before as even the tiniest question can take up a lot of time” CY</p> <p>“Sometimes we have spontaneous meetings. Someone writes and asks if we can connect to a meeting during five minutes, and then we do that” EX</p> <p>“It is possible to ask a question to anyone if you need help. But it has become harder as we are not in the office.” BX</p> <p>“My boss is very available...but I think she is even more available and efficient in her work as she does not have to go to the bank. Now she is working from home.”BX</p> <p>“My boss is very available...but I think she is even more available and efficient in her work as she does not have to go to the bank. Now she is working from home.”BX</p> |
|  | <p>1.5 Support and Care</p> | <p>“We have the possibility to call him (the boss) when we want, both day and night and talk” Person C, Bank Y.</p> <p>“ We have less contact because we work at different places but we have regular check-ins where we can discuss freely” Person A, bank X</p> <p>“I call my employees (to check-in both work and non work related matters)” Person A, Bank Y.</p> <p>“I make sure to stay in contact and try to make my employees laugh” Person E, Bank X.</p>  |

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| <p><b>2. Autonomy</b></p>               | <p>2.1 It's Complicated: Self-Discipline and Feeling of Effectiveness</p> | <p>“I have discipline because evidently I work too much (from home)” Person C, Bank Y<br/>         “I see myself as more effective at work” Person A, Bank X.<br/>         “My self discipline to be able to stop working is sometimes a disaster” Person D, Bank X. “I am a little bit less effective at home” Person C, Bank X.<br/>         “When I talk to coworkers I can hear that a lot of people feel more effective from home” Person A, Bank Y.</p>  |
|   | <p>2.2 Organisational and Independent decision-making</p>                 | <p>“I think a lot of important decisions take place in the coffee-room” (Which does not exist during remote work). Person C, Bank Y.<br/>         “Generally most decisions come from upper management” Person D, Bank Y.<br/>         “Most decisions are made by the board, smaller decisions we can discuss but there is not a big difference from before the pandemic ” Person C, bank X.<br/>         “I don't think there is any difference during the pandemic” (When asked about employees' influence on organisational decision making) Person B, Bank X.<br/>         “You can work in the evening, that type of flexibility is much easier during remote work” Person A, Bank X.<br/>         “I have heard co-workers, and myself included, that think remote work gives a bigger sense of freedom. You control your own time” Person A, Bank Y.<br/>         “You can take a long walk during lunch or in the afternoon and then work an hour in the evening instead” Person C, Bank Y.</p> |
| <p><b>3. Internal Communication</b></p> | <p>3.1 Non-agenda meetings</p>  | <p>“The company has encouraged our unit to have digital coffee twice a week just to chat.” Person A, bank X.<br/>         “We make sure to have digital coffee three times a week.” Person B, bank X.<br/>         “We have recurrent online coffee breaks to create some kind of social gathering” Person D, bank X.<br/>         “We have informal digital meetings, for example an after work, with no agenda” Person A, Bank Y</p>   |
|   | <p>3.2 Acknowledgment during remote work</p>                              | <p>“We use a lot of different forum to stay in contact” “We have chats, we have mail, we have teams and we have skype” Person E, Bank X<br/>         “We train to give each other positive and constructive feedback” Person D, Bank X.<br/>         “We work in teams, I have one or two people that always help me, you keep in contact every day”. Person B, bank Y.<br/>         “Sometimes you take each other for granted, but you think, who can I make happy today or even make laugh? It is the little things that matter more than you think” Person E, bank X.</p>  |

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|                               | <p>3.3 How it is to work remotely during Covid-19.</p> | <p>“We are using teams (in work meetings), it's effective but tiring” “Yesterday I had four different (teams) meetings and at five o'clock I felt extreme fatigue” Person A bank X.</p> <p>“ It takes more energy when you have meetings online” “ After four-five online meetings a day, you feel very tired” Person D, bank X.</p> <p>“ I have felt quite lonely, that you don't get the same personal confirmation that you used to” Person A, Bank Y.</p> <p>“You get more lonely when you sit at home, and I feel that I miss the office talk.” Person C, Bank X.</p>  |
| <p><b>4. Job security</b></p> |  | <p>“No, it has not changed. I experience a sense of security in my job. I did before and I do now... there is employment security to work in a bank. You are needed in all situations,” CY</p> <p>“It has not changed since the pandemic actually. Banks are banks. Then there are some bigger structural changes that have threatened. We have closed down the department for private affairs.” DY</p> <p>“I feel very secure in myself. The bank is doing good and is properly run. So it is a secure employer. Furthermore, banks do not fire people because of small things. And I know what I am doing and what I contribute.” AX</p> <p>It creates engagement. “having little need for the boss and taking care of oneself”. “We are specialists...and working a lot together. We have superiors that do not know what we know so we have to tell them how certain things have to be done.” AX</p> <p>“I am super confident in my job. I work at one of Sweden's best and safest workplaces.” BX Feels that her job will remain and that those feelings have not changed due to the pandemic.</p> <p>“I feel safe both to work with what I do and to work from home and not get infected. That is not something that has changed by the pandemic.” “One can feel a shortcoming while working from home...when you work together you receive confirmation if you have the right approach...but not in the same way while staying at home.” When asked if that could have something to do with the fact that you now can not compare how much you get done to other's accomplishments, she agreed and gave an example of doing work that does not produce visible results. “It affects the line of thought...what will the boss think?” She argues that she becomes less efficient while working from home. “If you are at work, there is nothing else that interrupts”. She feels that home life gets in the way. “If you are logging your hours, you can see that you do your time; however, it might not feel that way (while working from home).” CX</p> <p>“I feel safe in my job, but it could be a result of working within the organization for such a long time, even if I have had many different roles.” “I have come to the conclusion that I work and do my best and I cannot do</p> |

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|  |             | <p>anything more than that. If the bank is not happy with that, then so be it. I am not going to worry about that.”DX She continued to argue that those feelings have not changed due to the pandemic. She said: “I have a very good dialogue with people around me. We talk from time to time about what is happening. We recently had a reorganisation and there was a concern about whether or not our group would disappear, but it has not.” DX</p> <p>“Making them (the employees) laugh a little more makes them feel sufficient, to keep in touch.” EX</p> <p>“I think that we (leaders) have been forced to give even more autonomy (to the employees) as we can not see what they are doing during the work days.” EX</p> |
| <p><b>5. The Future of Remote Work</b></p> | <p>-//-</p> | <p>“You can ascertain that the need for office space is not as big anymore” Person A, Bank X.</p> <p>“It will never return to what it was before. I am convinced that we will continue to work from home two or three days a week even after the pandemic” Person B, Bank Y.</p> <p>“Working on distance does work. However, for me it is clear that we miss a lot (of the social life) when we don’t meet all” Person D, Bank X.</p> <p>“Already now, we have boardings meetings digital and this is something that will not cease to exist when the infection decreases, we will continue with digital meetings after (the pandemic) Person E, Bank X.</p>  |