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SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS AND BUSINESS

MASTER THESIS

**FOSTERING EMPLOYEE CONNECTIONS IN A HYBRID
WORKING ENVIRONMENT**

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AUTHORSHIP STATEMENT

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

sl. – Slovene

DOS – (sl. Diskovni operacijski sistem); Disk Operating System

EU – (sl. Evropska unija); European Union

HQC – (sl. Visoko-kakovostne povezave); High-quality connections

HR – (sl. kadrovski viri); Human resources

UNIX – (sl. Unipleksni informacijski računalniški sistem); UNIpIplexed Information Computing System

VPN – (sl. virtualno zasebno omrežje); Virtual private network

1 INTRODUCTION

Thanks to the internet and mobility, employees can work remotely, usually from home, and have flexible working hours. This modern approach to work allows employees to work from anywhere and these days, most firms provide their staff members this choice (MBA Skool Team, 2020).

Both the impression of quality of life and the relationship between employers and employees are changing because of the digitalization of work. People who could complete their tasks using digital means were told to work remotely during the COVID-19 epidemic but is a common practice today (Kinowska & Juchnowicz, 2021) Many companies are trying to get their employees back to the office, but some, as the company which will be used as an example in the research, have implemented the hybrid working model. To combine the best aspects of both, telework and office-based work, hybrid work is a relatively new term that gained popularity during the pandemic to describe a work arrangement where an employee splits their time between working at a traditional workplace and working remotely (Hopkins & Bardoel, 2023).

Euronews has performed research in August 2022, based on data from Eurostat and Statista, regarding the hybrid or remote work in the European union. According to the study, whilst just over 15% of workers in the UK routinely worked from home last year, 30% of workers in the EU worked from home on average (either completely remotely or in a hybrid model (Hurst, 2023).

Even though, the hybrid working model has many advantages, such as boosted productivity, motivation, additional flexibility and on the other hand the cost savings for the employer, there are also some disadvantages, which have been recognized, after the hybrid work was more frequently in use since 2020 (Capgemini Research Institute, 2023). Besides the disadvantages from the technical perspective, such as data security issues, there are also some cons, correlated to the social isolation of employees, absence of contact with colleagues and poor communication (Obdržálková & Moravcová, 2021).

Hybrid working environment also impacts how high-quality connections are created, which are short-term interactions in which both people experience vitality, positive regard, and mutuality (Dutton, 2003a). Not only are these connections influenced by the fact that two persons, from one team, may be in two different parts of the world, but also the fact that employees are spending just part time working on site and part from home or a third location. High quality connections build capacity and strength in people, groups, and institutions, but must be approached differently, when dealing with international teams, with a hybrid work model (Dutton, 2003b).

Regular contact with people, and co-workers lead to the development of strong bonds. Their comprehensive guide to workplace energization is structured around three key routes to high-quality connection: task facilitating, respectful engagement, and trusting (Dutton, 2023b).

Fostering connections between employees should be a common topic in every company, especially the ones having hybrid working arrangements, where employees don't have face-to-face interactions each day and may consequently feel lonely and left out. This can often be the case in international companies, which are located all around the world. Here, leaders or managers play a crucial role in connecting their team, and promoting good and open communication, also when not physically present in the same location. In addition to using tact and other social skills to motivate staff members to perform to the best of their abilities, effective leaders have a personal stake in the long-term success of their teams (Harvard Business Review, 2022).

The purpose of the master thesis is to contribute to the understanding of the nature of high-quality connections and how can these connections be fostered between employees, who work in hybrid environments and are dispersed all around the world.

The goals of the theoretical part of this thesis, are to firstly give the theoretical framework of the topic, what are high quality connections, what are companies already doing, to foster them, how are this connections addressed in terms of hybrid work environment etc. Contextualization is the second step, where I will establish and present the relevance and context of my research within the larger area, which means I will describe the context, the history, and the main ideas of the hybrid work environemnt, as well as pros and cons, with the aim to better understand as well then, the practical (research part of the thesis). The goal of the empirical part is to conduct research within a company, with the purpose to apply the theory and concepts, for the purpose of data analysis. The main research question is, how can employees foster high-quality connections in an international hybrid environment. With performing the research, I will be able to see if there are some deviations between the theory and practice, what do companies in theory do, to improve high quality connections, but how do that, on the other hand, employees see in practice.

The method used, in the master thesis, will be firstly, a synthesis of literature in the theoretical part, by defining the hybrid work, its beginnings, challenges and advantages it has brought. Furthermore, I will analyse its evolution, advantages and disadvantages and how does this influence the connections between the coworkers, which are working in an international environemnt. In the continuation, I will present the concept of high-quality connections, what are they, how can they be developed and how can they be fostered in a hybrid working model.. Lastly, from the theoretical perspective, I have investitaged the perception and strategis on fostering connections from the side of leaders and non leaders. Following the theoretical background, the focus will be on qualitative study in the empirical part, where I will define the research questions, goals and methodology of the empirical research, with the aim of data analysis between the four focus groups, wherethe findings will

be presented. At the end, I aim to present the main findings of the research and master thesis in general.

2 CHARACTERISTICS OF HYBRID WORK

Hybrid work is working, that has become especially popular, after the pandemic of Covid 19, all around the world. This working model has gained significant importance, as it shapes and influences the life of all people, using this working model. Below, the evolution of the model and its definition, as well as its advantages and disadvantages are presented.

2.1 Definition and evolution of hybrid work

When thinking of office work, there are few, traditional things or aspects that come to people's mind. The company building itself, desks and a chair, a few offices, shared by departments, where people come to work from Monday to Friday, usually from 9 to 5, where they during their breaks, go for a little walk around the office, to talk to their colleagues, or to meet them in kitchen, for a coffee. Office work (of course depends also on the branch and the company itself) is mostly structured, the working hours are clear, each has its spot from where they work every day, meetings are held in meeting rooms and once the working hours are done, usually, the work will wait until the next day, as people do not bring their notebooks with them afterward. It is not expected that employees will finish the work in the evening, from home, it is also not expected to discuss only work-related topics with their colleagues, as in their free time and on breaks, they are completely free. In this, let's say "traditional office", the boundaries between work and home are clear. When on-site, in the office, you work and you are on your spot, but once you go home, this is your free time. Also, in the case of sickness, you stay at home, you are not working from home, and once you are healthy again, you return to the office. In past years, also with the outbreak of COVID-19, more and more people would like to break this "traditional", fully onsite working model, with a combination of onsite and remote work, so-called hybrid working model. As with every other thing, this model itself has advantages as well as disadvantages, which will be clearly specified and investigated afterward.

People were working from home long before the internet became popular. It wasn't until the Industrial Revolution that the idea of worker collectives coming together in large numbers to finish tasks collectively—apart from fighting wars and tending to the sick and injured, which are typically brought on by them—became a reality. A major paradigm changes in society resulted in the "norm" changing from a world of solitary laborers selling their goods and services from their homes to something more like the rat race we are all familiar with. There were designated workplace spaces and daily commutes. Another paradigm change happened with the advent of the digital age. Employees had been using UNIX (UNIplicated

information computing system) and DOS (Disk operating system) for years before the internet was created in the early 1980s. By building a system to connect pre-existing networks, new possibilities for connectivity and alternate modes of operation were possible (Butler, n.d.).

Looking at the past, when considering all paid workdays in the United States in 1965, the percentage of full days spent working from home was less than 5%. For the next two decades, the percentage of workers who did so from home increased gradually. Working from home in the 1970s frequently meant carrying around heavy caseloads of paperwork, furthermore it meant floppy disks and phone calls by the 1990s. Nevertheless, the development of the internet in the twenty-first century made remote collaboration easier. The percentage of workers who work from home reached 7% by 2019, and in the beginning of the 2020, the epidemic of Covid 19 struck (Barrero et al., 2023). The pandemic itself, has influenced social distancing, which resulted in a big shift to work from home, in order to prevent the spreading of the virus and to keep people at home.

The major move to working from home was sparked by the epidemic, but it was made feasible by earlier advancements. Web-based video-conferencing platforms such as Teams, Webex, and Zoom; cloud-based file-sharing services such as Box, Drive, and Dropbox; and collaboration software such as for example Slack, are essential tools for working remotely. In 2000, there were none of them. The good thing was, that when the pandemic happened, these tools were already implemented and somewhere in use, so they just needed to be adopted and were ready to support the world in these new circumstances (Barrero et al., 2023).

Nowadays, businesses are discovering that their employees are reluctant to give up working remotely. The vast majority of those who began working remotely as a result of COVID-19 support it and wish to keep doing so in the future. Businesses may no longer claim that they are unable to function remotely (a frequent justification for not embracing remote work prior to 2020), but they also cannot require staff members to return to the office full-time given, as it became popular all around the world, in different branches. The most widely used remedy is the hybrid model, which appears to be the topic that every firm is currently dealing with (Griffis, n.d.).

A hybrid work model is a work schedule that combines both in-person and remote work for employees. There are times when employees can choose which days they work in the office and which days they work from home, which depends also on the company. While each organization's hybrid model now appears different, there are a few overarching themes. Whatever the details, businesses that decide to use a hybrid model all face some challenges, as they encounter the positive and negative sides of it (Griffis, n.d.). The ability to work remotely is becoming the standard, with many employers providing this perk to their staff. But it can be difficult to use, particularly for recent workers (EURES, 2023).

The model itself, has different types of it, which between themselves share basic similarities, but are different in approach or relationship between being on site and the employee working remotely. The Remote-first Hybrid working model is one example, where with a few notable exceptions, a growing number of executives are opting to go remote-first, which means that their operations will mostly resemble those of a fully remote business. Remarkably, the majority will continue to allow workers to work from their workplaces (Griffis, n.d.).

Additionally, some employers don't provide their workers the same flexibility, thus they might insist that some workers keep showing up for work even when it requires them to be physically there. With this strategy, workers can move away from the office, but the business will retain office space for those workers who truly value it (Griffis, n.d.). Although there is interest in hybrid work, it is still unknown which employees would rather continue working from home and which would rather spend as much time in the office as possible. Also, it is still unknown to what degree office design and the availability of home workspace influence this decision (Appel-Meulenbroek et al., 2022).

Another example is the office-occasional hybrid working model, where some companies strive to get their employees back in the offices, for various reasons, it can be that they are reluctant to lose money on the workplaces, that are not being used, or they are not fully convinced of implementing the full remote work. Here, the concept is for staff members to visit the workplace a few times a week, which can also differ between the departments, type of work, etc., who will spend how much in and out of office (Griffis, n.d.). While there are differences in organizational and individual preferences regarding hybrid working, firms can reap numerous advantages by enabling a hybrid work environment (Shiels, 2023).

Lastly, there is as well the office-first, remote work allowed hybrid working model, where an alternative would be to continue having both the office and remote work, but to identify the office as the main location for work. Before COVID-19, it was typical for businesses to have a small portion of their employees work remotely and the majority of them from a single main office. This strategy is especially popular when every member of the leadership group is present in the office. With the exception of remote workers, the leadership team will almost certainly engage in face-to-face communication and collaboration, which will naturally cause the remainder of the organization to become office centric (Griffis, n.d.).

The hybrid working paradigm has become a revolutionary force in the ever-changing world of work environments, challenging conventional ideas about where, when, and how work gets done. It is critical to comprehend the benefits and drawbacks of the hybrid working model as companies, businesses and organizations attempt to achieve a delicate balance between in-person and remote labor, which I will address more clearly in the upcoming chapters. Firstly, the general advantages and disadvantages of the hybrid working model will be presented, and in the 3rd chapter of the thesis, I will further discuss these (dis)advantages, also presented in Table 1, through the aspects of fostering high-quality connections between employees.

Table 1: Advantages and disadvantages of hybrid workign model

| | Advantages | Disadvantages |
|--|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Individual level | Cost savings | Feeling of loneliness/isolation |
| | Less commuting to work | Lack of communication |
| | Time flexibility | Lack of collaboration/team work |
| | Personalized workplace | Focus just on work tasks |
| | Higher productivity | Technical literacy |
| | Balance between work and home | Internet access and it's stability |
| | Schedule flexibility | Longer working hours |
| | Better work-life balance | Higher work intensity |
| | Higher employee satisfaction | Distractions at home (family, pets) |
| | More time for work tasks | Organizational culture |
| Organizational level | Increased employee satisfaction | Technology |
| | Cost savings | Security risk and issues |
| | Less office space needed | Team cohesion |
| | Higher employee productivity | Monitoring performance |
| | Lower employees burn out rate | Virtual culture |
| | Utilizing a worldwide talent pool | Tasks coordination |
| | Business resilience | Evaluating the work results |
| | Strong employee work ethic | Less employee communication |
| | | Harder teamwork |
| | | Less informal interaction |
| Social and environmental aspect | Increased employee engagement | Isolation |
| | Improved work-life balance | Communication gaps |
| | Reduced carbon emissions | Increased energy consumption at home |
| | Less pollution | |

Source: Kossek et al., (2015); Barrero et al., (2023); Loubier (2017); Vidhyaa et al., (2022); Stone et al., (2018); Bakhsh (2013); Flores (2019); Tsipursky (2023); Bollestad et al., (2022)

2.2 Advantages of hybrid working model

Many workers, both young and old, married, and single, report feeling constantly more pressure to balance work and personal obligations, saying that work is "interfering with life" more and more. (Kossek et al., 2015). Not everyone has the same level of proficiency when working in a hybrid environment. Being able to manage a hybrid environment effectively is a skill and a source of power. Employees in hybrid roles must possess ambidexterity, which is the ability to balance and navigate in two different environments, unlike those in entirely co-located or fully remote settings (Mortensen & Haas, 2023).

The benefit that is most often highlighted is time savings, which is mostly brought about by not having to commute to work. (Kučera et al., 2021). Flexible time is an additional advantage of working remotely. You are free to choose your own schedule for work. For example, when it's night-time, some people operate more efficiently and quickly, and the others when it's morning. However, not every employer offers remote workers flex time, it depends on the company or the manager itself, whereas as well on the type of the work one does. Furthermore, you have ample free time to spend any way you choose if you have flexible work hours and are not required to work in an office. You can use it for shopping, spending time with loved ones, or just unwinding, and have more time for leisure and personal growth. The biggest benefit of the flexibility is, that you decide when and where you will get something done and you can manage your time based on your preferences (Loubier, 2017)

Another advantage is in fact, that this model helps to maintain the company culture and community. There are typically fewer office politics, distractions, louder noise levels, and fewer (or more productive) meetings when working remotely. When you take away the need for a commute, remote workers usually have more time and fewer interruptions, which increases productivity. This is a major advantage of working from home for both businesses and people. Furthermore, this model implies money savings, by reducing the costs as they can reduce the office/workplace (Vidhyaa et al., 2022). Some have even implemented the shared desk policy, which means, that employees rotate from desk to desk, on the in-office days (implies for the remote workers), and the ones that are not working hybrid, but are in the office of all time, have their fixed desk (TableAir, 2023).

2.3 Disadvantages of hybrid working model

As in every other case, the hybrid working model itself has as well some disadvantages, related to different aspects. To be able to work from home, technology needs to be working perfectly and the most challenges, when working from home, are related to the technology, especially with the internet connection, mobile signal and VPN working correctly (Stone et al., 2018). Yes, high-speed Internet and new communication technologies have eliminated all hardware barriers to working from home. Although the business gains greatly from it in terms of lower costs and happier workers, management faces several difficulties with the

new work style (Bakhsh, 2013). Being connected all the time, has also its disadvantages, as some may feel under pressure, that they need to be available and ready to jump in, to work, all the time. Since the office is in that case the same as home, the employees can work even more intense, longer and lose the feeling for clear boundary between work and home (Felstead & Henseke, 2017).

Another challenge, when working hybrid is the lack of collaboration/communication with others (Flores, 2019). It goes without saying that working remotely eliminates face-to-face communication; yet research indicates that people did not merely substitute voice or video calls for face-to-face encounters. Indeed, they discovered that the adoption of remote work across the entire company resulted in a general decline in synchronous communication, which includes scheduled meetings and audio/video conversations. On the other hand, research indicates that working remotely led to an increase in asynchronous communication through the use of email (Yang et al., 2021). The necessity of providing employees with communication and collaboration training is becoming more and more apparent as businesses move toward a remote and hybrid work paradigm (Tsipursky, 2023). The emails, conference calls, texts, and other digital exchanges are lacking something - nonverbal communication. The informality of an email or the tone of a text are so ambiguous that even our closest friends can misunderstand them, even when we work together. These misunderstandings lead to worry, which can have a negative impact on engagement, morale, productivity, and creativity. Remote teams must overcome obstacles and devise new, more effective ways to work in order to function at their best. When it comes to remote collaboration, there are three different types of distance: operational (such as team size, bandwidth, and skill levels), affinity (such as values, trust, and interdependency), and physical (location and time). Each of these, requires special approach and attention, but managers, that want to improve team performance, should firstly concentrate on closing the affinity distance (Dhawan & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2018).

Another important aspect, which can be challenging, when it comes to working hybrid is the work-life balance. It is defined as the combination of the time you spend working to the time you spend with your family and engaging in activities you enjoy (Cambridge dictionary, n.d.). Employees have rights regarding the balancing of work and family duties, and work-life balance affects the quality of working life (Sullivan, 2012). Weak work-family boundaries may lead to decreased productivity (Bakhsh, 2013). In conclusion, organizations using hybrid work models need to be aware of the importance of work-life balance for employee well-being, job happiness, and productivity (Balasubramaniam, n.d.).

Before COVID-19, loneliness was already a severe problem, but the tactic, where people had to keep physical and social distance during the pandemic period, made it even worse (Miyake et al., 2021). Due to their reduced in-person connections, increased social isolation, and missed opportunities to socialize with coworkers and friends, employees who work remotely may experience higher levels of loneliness. Furthermore, maintaining interpersonal

interactions online is challenging due of the lack of contact and informal ties (Bollestad et al., 2022)

As mentioned in above challenges, even if the work from home, looks like a perfect combination for managing work and life, it can often be too stressful, employees work overtime hours, feel isolated, do not feel the support of their coworkers, which can sometimes result in the burn out. The occurrence of workplace demands and pressure, coupled with a dearth of social support—such as affectionate and casual conversations that take place during breaks in the traditional office working day, a sense of isolation from coworkers, and a lack of connection with the company—can lead to burnout through a psychological-energetic process that also lowers motivation to work. Consequently, meeting fundamental psychological needs is a crucial underlying mechanism for workers' success at work since it can influence motivation and feelings of fatigue (Van den Broeck et al., 2008).

Advantages and disadvantages of the hybrid working model can be restructured under three bigger groups or aspects: individual, organizational, and social and environmental aspects.

3 HIGH-QUALITY CONNECTIONS BETWEEN EMPLOYEES

Regular contact with people, and coworkers leads to the development of strong bonds. Their comprehensive guide to workplace energization is structured around three key routes to high-quality connection: task facilitating, respectful engagement, and trusting (Dutton, 2023a). The following chapter describes the high-quality connections, how can these be fostered between the employees, when they work hybrid and all around the world and also, which strategies can be used to foster these connections.

3.1 Definition and meaning of high-quality connections

Relationships have significant importance in the life of all people, it can be the personal relationships, we build with our friends and family, but as well the relationships we build with our work colleagues. Nevertheless, work is where we spent 8 hours a day on average, 5 times a week, which increases the importance of relationships and connections between co-workers, even more. Workplace relationships are essential to our quality of life as well as how work gets done and they exhibit the whole range of quality, just like other types of interactions. When they work well, they may be a creative source of learning, energy, and enrichment that promotes the development, well-being, and expansion of people, communities, and organizations. In the worst-case scenario, they may be a caustic and toxic source of discomfort, exhaustion, and malfunction (Dutton & Ragins, 2017). It is not only about the relationships, between the employees, but it is also about the relationship between the employer and employees, which influence on the employee satisfaction regarding working conditions and their engagement in the decision-making process (CIPD n.d.).

Traditionally, employees interact face-to-face daily and the approach to fostering these connections, is slightly different for the organisations, which used the hybrid working model, where people are spending some time together in the office, some time in home office and for some, they see or hear each other only online, due to the physical distance of their office premises.

A person's sense of relationship and belonging that they can have from supportive interactions with those around them is known as human connection. That is, when two or more individuals engage in conversation and each feels heard, seen and respected. After the interaction, people feel stronger and more nourished. Social connections have been essential to our survival as a species over the years. We performed all of our activities in social groupings, whether we were traveling in stagecoaches, hunting for meat, or gathering berries. Our world has progressed from gathering and hunting food to grocery shopping because of this human connection (Stiles, 2021).

The term "high-quality connections" (HQCs) typically refers to the specific good interactions that take place in the workplace between two or more individuals (Sundet & Carlsen, 2019). They are relationships with other people, where we feel vitality, positive regard, and mutuality. Vitality reflects the elevated feeling of power we experience when we are truly linked to another person – as though we are more present in the moment. Furthermore, when experiencing positive regard, someone sees the best in us, even if our relationship is brief and we have not known them for a longer time. Finally is the mutuality, which is the perception of another person's openness and responsiveness (Dutton & Heaphy, 2016).

Not only are these connections influenced by the fact that two persons, from one team, may be located in two different parts of the world, but also the fact that employees are spending just part time working on site and part from home or a third location. High quality connections build capacity and strength in people, groups, and institutions, but must be approached differently, when dealing with international teams, with a hybrid work model (Dutton, 2003a). The modern workplace depends more and more on transient relationships and quick collaboration, therefore, people must swiftly establish strong relationships both inside and outside of organizations. These strong relationships have favorable effects on both the organization and the individual employees by fostering positive interactions at work. The mechanics behind connection quality reveal how leaders can influence relationships in the workplace in a more constructive way. The corporate environment and the methods used by leaders to foster connections are key factors in the creation and maintenance of these relationships (Stephens et al., n.d.).

We also develop in high-quality connections because they broaden our perspectives, accelerate our rate of knowledge absorption, increase the range of actions we can take, and make us more open-minded, fun, engaged, and resilient to setbacks. In sharp contrast to low-quality connections, which limit opportunities for growth due to defensiveness, inadequacy, and lack of safety, high-quality connections foster positive feelings and relationships (Dutton

& Heaphy, 2016). Fostering connections between employees should be a common topic in every company, especially the ones having hybrid working models, where employees don't have face-to-face interactions each day and may consequently feel lonely and left out. Here, leaders or managers play a crucial role in connecting their team, and promoting good and open communication, also when not physically present in the same location. In addition to using tact and other social skills to motivate staff members to perform to the best of their abilities, effective leaders have a personal stake in the long-term success of their teams (Dutton & Heaphy, 2016).

The meaning of high-quality connections, can be looked through the individual and organizational performance. They help employees recover from setbacks and adjust to change by enhancing their cognitive processing speed, memory, and immune systems, among other aspects of individual functioning. In addition, they strengthen the organizational structure, provide opportunities for learning and inquiry amongst themselves, and promote psychological safety and trust. Not to mention, the strong bonds allow people to mature, become attached to their organization, and develop personally (Stephens et al., n.d.).

3.2 Characteristics of hybrid employee connections

The development of remote work practices and virtual organizations is made possible by information technology (IT). Making these remote technology end users' productive members of their organizations is becoming increasingly important as the trend of working remotely continues to rise (Staples, 2001). The increasing accessibility of online platforms and their affordability has led to a global increase in the number of people with knowledge and communication technologies. Face-to-face interactions are no longer necessary for establishing or sustaining social connections because advancements in information and communication technology have made it feasible to communicate virtually without being in person for a while. However, since online chats and digital presence cannot take the place of in-person connection, establishing and strengthening relationships and fostering trust require at least occasional face-to-face contact (Urry, 2007).

Already before the pandemic of Covid 19, the communication through different technological channels has developed enormously, and was used in the everyday life and work of employees. Also, when working from the office, different virtual communication channels, besides face-to-face interactions has been used, such as sending e-mails, calling our colleagues via telephone or maybe even Teams or Zoom. With the outbreak of Covid 19 and companies going (partially) remote – hybrid, the importance of those mentioned above has increased even more, for the people being able to communicate, maintain relationships and perform daily tasks as well as job obligations. The length of time spent working from home had an impact on how people made and maintained business friendships (Sias et al., 2012). In pandemic period, employees in offices had to modify their work schedules to accommodate remote work, but many businesses carried on almost as usual in spite of this

change. As a result, "hybrid" working rules that encourage employees to work at home occasionally as well as at the office have been adopted which is a common practice also today (Keightley et al., 2022). Relationships and communications between employees and their manager had changed, once the hybrid work was implemented, which is more thoroughly presented in the Table 2 below.

Technology can foster a closer community inside the hybrid workplace, but it frequently falls short in imitating the human element that is so important in traditional office settings. Our yearning for interpersonal connection is ingrained in us. A blended work environment makes this considerably more difficult to accomplish. Even if messaging apps and email might be useful, they don't have the nonverbal clues that make in-person interactions so powerful (Stanton, 2022). People can work remotely thanks to hybrid working model, which also has the potential to alter how people view their jobs by affecting the kind, quantity, and quality of social support connections teleworkers have with supervisors, office-based coworkers, and one other. Some people who work hybrid, may experience social or professional isolation, which can have a detrimental effect on their ability to do their jobs, particularly if they do so often. Furthermore, this results in the social disconnection among hybrid employees (Collins, 2016). While social isolation can happen when workers engage with coworkers less, professional isolation is characterized by less prospects for advancement, rewards, or personal growth (Cooper & Kurland, 2002).

Table 2: Characteristics of hybrid employee connections

| Characteristics of hybrid employee connections | |
|---|--|
| Employee-employee communication | When one or more employees are working from home, meetings and calls tend to be online |
| | Communication tools, such as e-mails, Teams or Zoom are crucial for work to run smoothly and to ensure ongoing communication between the coworkers |
| | Meetings are mostly held virtually, fewer in person interaction (due to hybrid work) |

To be continued

Table 2: Characteristics of hybrid employee connections (cont.)

| Characteristics of hybrid employee connections | |
|---|---|
| Employee-employee communication | Sometimes, employees can feel like bothering other employees, when having to call them for every issue, instead of meeting them in person or discussion it casually, in the kitchen |
| | When in the office, employees communicate more spontaneously, find solutions faster |
| Employee-manager communication | Less in person communication |
| | Prescheduled one on one virtual meetings, to discuss daily topics |
| | When help or advice needed, it often needs to go through email or phone, as not necessarily together in the office, on the same day |
| | Harder to have also personal relationships as less spontaneous, face-to-face communication |
| | Employees may struggle more to ask for advice or help |
| | Managers track the process of hybrid employees more difficult |
| | Both parties available anytime, also when sitting miles apart |
| Team communication and collaboration | Communication through predefined communication channels (for example Teams is used for meetings) |
| | Possible social and professional isolation |
| | Less spontaneous meetings and discussions |
| | Less employee interactions, people working on site, spend more time discussing things, also private |
| | Less ability to learn from your coworkers |
| | Teamwork and team responsibilities are more difficult to coordinate |
| | Feeling uncomfortable and afraid of overloading or disturbing colleagues with calls and messages |
| | When the team is all together on site, they build stronger connections, bring decisions faster and can distribute tasks more efficiently |

Sources: Madsen (n.d.); Barrero et al., (2023); Loubier (2017); Maher (2014), Flores (n.d.); Bakhsh (2013); Bollestad et al., (2022)

Interpersonal connections among employees are very important for the employee well-being, performance, and motivation to perform work well and on time. Employee performance is likely to be impacted by coworkers in several ways. Coworkers have an impact on employees' individual attitudes and behaviors in "horizontal exchanges" that occur daily, such as social interactions and reciprocity rules. When coworkers in the office don't work from home, office workers do better. The success rate per employee decreases as the proportion of coworkers who work from home increases. It is a truth that working from home makes it harder for employees to coordinate with one another, particularly if some employees work from home while the rest remain in the office (hybrid working model). This is essential for productive cooperation on projects since their effort affects everyone else (Van der Lippe & Lippeny, 2019). Employees play a crucial role here, as they help to target and achieve the goals of the organization, so people working in company, are companies most valuable asset. Nevertheless, management plays a crucial role, when managing hybrid teams, as they have to use strategic and logically thought-out approach, to contribute to the good team work on one side and great results, for the company, on the other side. Effective hybrid team building, and its management is a need for effective human resource management and employee satisfaction (Lajčín & Porubčanová, 2021).

Collaborating with others, by working in teams, generates several innovative concepts and solutions that might not be thought of by one person alone. Coworkers inspire themselves among and within teams, where they push each other to think or act differently, which can also generate creative ideas. Team members then split up the tasks' work, cutting down the overall amount of time spent on it, where every participant had distinct qualities, which boosts the team's effectiveness. (Lajčín & Porubčanová, 2021)

But how is teamwork influenced by the hybrid working model? As already mentioned, employees don't interact on day-to-day basis in person, they don't meet spontaneously and they have to be very organized and preschedule the time, reserved only for the team, to work more closely together. If team procedures are modified to take advantage of the affordances provided by the technology, virtual teams can perform better. Consequently, virtual teams need sufficient training on the technology and the work procedures made possible by it to guarantee that they can adjust quickly. Working hybrid, knowledge workers no longer just happen to cross paths with one another, to strike up impromptu discussions about their everyday lives, jobs, or ongoing projects.

The social affordances provided by video-call services, such as Zoom or Teams, became increasingly crucial for facilitating communication and idea sharing, since they no longer necessarily share a physical space. Hybrid employees typically specify a topic they want to discuss and must first actualize the social affordances provided by social media channels or video-conferencing platforms in order to initiate conversation. In this manner, the talks become far more targeted and purpose-driven, which improves productivity and enables people to do their work considerably more quickly. Since they can no longer simply approach their colleagues and ask inquiries, new hires' confidence to ask questions about

their work tasks is negatively impacted when they are not surrounded by colleagues in the workplace, which is another challenge of hybrid working environment. When working from home, new hires are unable to follow meetings with their colleagues and learn about what is going on, which presents a barrier to their learning. Since they are unable to see through social media and platforms whether a colleague is busy or not, they do not want to bother them or send them a barrage of messages. They do not wish to ask as many questions as possible, even though they are encouraged to do so within the collective (Waizenegger et al., 2020). To address these concerns and issues, it is important to have the well-structured on-boarding for the new, hybrid hires, where they will feel welcome and most importantly – connected to the rest of the team (MIT Human Resources, n.d.).

Gathering of employees, team spirit and organizational loyalty are factors that build successful company on one side and on the other, keeps the employees and their well-being, their connections nourished. It is very important, that employees interact on a regular basis, can be privately or work-related topics, that they share they thought and knowledge between themselves. This is challenging when they are working hybrid, because even though they are not actually absent, but just working from elsewhere, this approach can decrease the productivity of the team. The degree to which coworkers' remote work appears to have an impact on each employee's performance, as the digital presence can not fully substitute the physical presence in the office (Van der Lippe & Lippenyi, 2019).

The goal of the company or organization, working hybrid, should be to focus on the connections, relationships and team work between their employees, that they learn how to work together effectively, even when not physically together in the office every day. It is not just about the company goals, that the team needs to collaborate, it is also about the feeling of belonging that employees develop in a closely connected team. Even though working hybrid, it is important to encourage tasks that require collaboration and team meetings, as this fosters the employee connections. It is not just the challenge, of how the hybrid team should function, it is also about how to structure and lead this team. And that is where, the management itself, also has a crucial role. It is important to remember that many factors, such as the type of employment, an individual's personality and preferences, the organization's policies, and the degree to which the difficulties associated with working remotely are addressed, can all affect how effective hybrid work is (Vijaya Lakshmi et al., 2023). In the continuation, I will analyze the approach and perspective towards, hybrid work and employee connections from the perspective of leaders, managers and non-leaders, employees, and how can both sides, contribute to the fostering of high-quality employee connections.

3.3 Mechanisms for building and fostering high-quality connections

Organizational leaders are thinking about ways to make hybrid working model arrangements, to function more purposefully as they are becoming more and more common and will likely do so also in the future (Chung & Kehoe, 2022). As mentioned in the above chapters, there are several different challenges, connected to the hybrid work, but the following will focus on the challenge, how can employees and managers, foster high-quality connections among employees. High-quality connections, both literally and symbolically energize people, and emphasizing these relationships reopens crucial and fundamental questions regarding the impact of employment on people's health and well-being. Gaining fresh insights into positive organizational-lead behavior and activities is made possible by concentrating on HQCs (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003). We develop ourselves when engaging in high-quality relationships, because it broadens our perspectives, speeds up our rate of knowledge absorption, broadens our repertory of actions, and makes us more open, fun, engaged, and resilient to setbacks (Dutton & Heaphy, 2016). Firstly, it is of crucial importance, to establish clear communication channels, with no fear of reaching out to one another, where even the regular check-ins are welcome, to nourish the feeling of connectedness (Vijaya Lakshmi et al., 2023). With this, formal and informal organizational practices can be incorporated, in order to boost the connectivity and foster long term high-quality connections. Even for the international, hybrid teams, these practices can be applicable (Stephens, n.d.).

To be able to address the practices, for fostering these connections, it is crucial to understand the mechanisms, through which high-quality connections are build and strengthened (fostered).

3.3.1 Cognitive mechanisms

The study of cognitive mechanisms focuses on how the brain carries out mental functions as perception, learning, memory, thought, and emotion (ScienceDirect, n.d.). Employees are predisposed to developing HQCs by both conscious and unconscious cognitive processes. Firstly, through the other-awareness process which is the ability to differentiate between one's own actions, thoughts, and feelings and those of others. Additionally, a key element in building a connection is acknowledging the presence of others and being conscious of their actions. Another process is connected to employees' perceptions of other individuals, which are shaped by so called "smaller parts" of their behavior (less than five minutes), including gestures and facial expressions. The people that employees or managers choose to connect with, and how these relationships then grow, are shaped by first impressions (Stephens, n.d.). Important to mention is as well the ability to recognize and comprehend another person's thoughts in a given circumstance, which is known as cognitive perspective taking.

3.3.2 Emotional mechanisms

Understanding other's motivations and behaviors may be made easier, when employees share their emotional states among themselves or with their managers (Nummenmaa et al., 2012), which positively impacts the HQCs (Stephens, n.d.). Encouraging individuals and groups alike while acknowledging their feelings fosters more trust, better communities, and a sense of caring for others (Porath & Boissy, 2023). When someone feels another person's emotion through vicariously, empathy is created. Warmth, compassion, and concern for the other are experienced by employees who have empathy for them, and this in turn inspires pro-social and altruistic behavior—markers of high-quality cultures (Stephens, n.d.). Being empathetic is a crucial part of emotional intelligence and a useful ability to have while interacting with others (Sadri, 2015). This is closely connected to positive emotions, which are positive indicators of flourishing, or the state of being at your best. Positive emotional experiences, such as happiness, curiosity, satisfaction, love and other, undoubtedly represent times in people's lives, when they are free from the bad feelings (Fredrickson, 2001). Because it increases attention to the benefactor's excellent traits and the urge to relate to them, gratitude is especially crucial for creating HQCs (Stephens, n.d.). Furthermore, there is the emotional contagion, which is described by the unconscious taking of another person's emotions. As this is not necessarily only true for the face-to-face communication, this can happen also through virtual channels, for example when talking to coworkers on Teams or when simply watching a movie (ScienceDirect, n.d.).

3.3.3 Behavioral mechanisms

To develop and foster HQCs, behaviors – observable components of interpersonal communication – are essential. Playful activities encourage learning about alternative reaction patterns, that are less common in work or non-play modes, by enabling variation in those patterns. But how does this project on the high-quality connections? Play that is separate from the "real world" promotes taking risks with others and a reduction in self-consciousness. These emotions make it easier for people to connect with others (Stephens, n.d.). Another mechanism, task enabling, is a process, that requires mutual investment and benefits from both sides. If one is open to help, either employees between themselves, or managers to employees, both sides can improve and grow in this process, but especially the success of other party is flourished. This approach fosters the quality of connections among employees (Dutton, 2003b). Additionally, there is a mechanism known as respectful engagement, in which one person expresses their ideals to another through modest, everyday actions and spoken exchanges. These actions increase people's chances of making meaningful, high-quality connections when they uphold the fundamental human rights of respect and dignity (Stephens, n.d.).

3.4 Strategies for fostering high-quality connections

Encouraging polite interaction between colleagues is one of the finest strategies to cultivate high-quality connections. Respectful interactions among coworkers foster a sense of social dignity that upholds one's competence and self-worth. Employees, whether working remotely or on site, can feel energized and empowered by respectful participation, which increases their awareness of their own potential (Dutton, 2003b). Encouraging high-quality connections in the workplace is arguably the most effective and long-lasting approach to establish the framework for long-term human well-being and improved productivity (Dutton, 2017). In figure 1, strategies for fostering connections are presented.

Figure 1: Strategies for fostering high-quality connections



Source: Own work based on Dutton (2003b); Stephens (n.d) and Sundet & Carlsen (2019)

First major strategy is conveying presence, where one person is being psychologically available and paying attention to another person. By focusing attention on one another rather than on outside distractions, people can create a powerful sense of mutual connection, which fosters high-quality connections (Dutton, 2003b). It is also important that employees, working hybrid or in any other working model, in this presence also show appreciation one to another and make a conscious effort, to help one another (Stephens, n.d.). As mentioned in above chapters, hybrid workers can often feel isolated and lonely, but by taking such actions, the risk of feeling left out, can be minimized.

Being genuine is the second strategy or act, that has to be taken in order to foster high-quality connections in a hybrid working environment (Dutton, 2003b). People prefer to gravitate

toward those who are real because it takes courage, persistence, and confidence to be true to oneself (Winch, 2015). No matter how well-intentioned, it does not promote genuine connection when individuals behave nicely by decree, this intention has to be genuine, authentic and honest (Dutton, 2003b).

To improve the well-being of employees, and nevertheless, to also strengthen the HQCs, it is of great importance, that when interacting and communicating to one another, people are able to show respect, acknowledgement and affirmation (Stephens, n.d.). Businesses that uphold the worth of their employees, provide a strong foundation for excellent relationships (Dutton, 2003b). Especially for those, working remotely and not being present in the office, sometimes need more attention and recognition, to not feel behind and that their work is not seen or recognized.

As in every other situation, when working together with people, the very important aspect or strategy is strong communication. It is very important, that we express our thoughts clearly, that we choose our words in order to minimize defensiveness and to maximize the clarity. One should be sensitive when using unsupportive speech, such as sarcasm or negative comments, as these kinds of communication make it more difficult for someone to focus and comprehend what is being said (Dutton, 2003b). Especially when working hybrid, not being together on daily basis, such comments or observations can negatively impact employee relationships, well-being and can be misunderstood. When people spend more time together, also just by meeting randomly for the coffee in the company, they develop different bond and may form also friendship relationship, and the communication can potentially change and become less formal. Nevertheless, since social connections foster commitment and trust, which reduce conflict and promote loyalty and pro-social behavior, they are viewed as desirable (Hafermalz & Riemer, 2020). Respectful engagement—recognizing the value of others—drives creativity on both the individual and team levels and strengthens teams. Therefore, high-quality relationships also increase resilience and inspire new behaviors (Sundet & Carlsen, 2019).

On the one hand, it is about how we express ourselves, what words we use to approach our coworkers but on the other hand it is the other role – are we listening effectively, what the other side has to say? While listening is a polite way to interact, it takes work to listen well, particularly when we are facing interruptions and distractions. Respectful listening has two characteristics: it is active and empathetic. The goal of empathic listening is to understand the speaker's perspective by focusing on them. Conversely, attentive listeners are responsive listeners (Dutton, 2003b). Being receptive to others is essential to building human connections in the workplace. In this sense, responsiveness can be viewed as responding from within discourse. Responsiveness describes the way that relating begins and grows through the spontaneous or planned ways in which persons respond to each other (Sundet & Carlsen, 2019).

3.4.1 Leaders' perspective and strategies

Fundamentally, leadership is the capacity to guide a group of individuals toward a shared objective. Every company and organization have a leader or more leaders, no matter how big the organization is. Effective leadership produces prosperous and constructive results for the company, where different approaches can be taken into consideration (Henry, 2020).

As the hybrid working became more and more popular, it has also shown some challenges, that leaders need to overcome in order to successfully lead a hybrid team. A few of these difficulties have to do with how hybrid workers behave and perform, as well as organizational, technical, or managerial issues, human resource management, and legal issues (Maher, 2014).

To overcome these challenges and to be able to foster high-quality connections, leaders have to work on this, prepare the strategy and implement it, taking into consideration that they are not leading face-to-face, every day in office team, but the team that is on one hand working hybrid and can be also dispersed globally. To grow and strengthen HQCs, according to Harvard Business Review, leaders have several possibilities how to approach this subject. One approach to it, would be to organize a specified time slot, when all team members that are that day in the office, go for lunch together, or even to spend some quality time, all together, maybe also with other departments afterwork. In such way, also employees that were for example that day working remotely, can join in the afternoon/evening hours, to interact in person. It is also important, that leaders encourage and push one another to grow and further develop (Dutton & Heaphy, 2016). For the managers, being able to lead their hybrid teams better, organizations should provide trainings, where they would expand their knowledge and practice on how to communicate, make teamwork and how to motivate hybrid employees (Maher, 2014). Trainings and workshops can be useful as well for managers as for employees, to be able to work together better and build stronger, long-term connections among each other (Aarsted, 2015). With such practices and knowledge, not only high-quality connections are being fostered but as well the positive relationships at work are being nested and strengthened (Dutton & Ragins, 2017). With continuous improvement and development of managers as well as employees, setting of learning goals can be useful tactic in nourishing HQCs, by for example making this a team task, for two or more employees, doing it together. Either remotely or together in person (Dutton & Heaphy, 2016). For all these to function properly, organizations should have a remote support team, which would be available all the time, offering help on several subjects, providing all the support needed (may it be technical, may it be personal (Maher, 2014). Additionally, leaders can seek for an organizational difficulty or issue, and form a working team to address it, with the specific objective of fostering HQCs that will promote everyone's learning and development. Leaders, who actively work to improve the quality of connections inside a team or work group, which they are currently part of, can revitalize it, by motivating participants to look out for and offer assistance to one another (Dutton & Heaphy, 2016).

Furthermore, it is also important that leader act like team coaches, and by that bringing big benefits to the team (CCL, 2023). Good coaching creates memorable moments and motivates team members to improve the quality. Since hybrid workers require an effective quantity of coaching to thrive, coaching in the hybrid or remote environment likely has a greater impact than it does in an on-site setting (Forbes Coaches Council, 2017). That is why, when employees, that do not interact face-to-face on daily basis, managers have to make additional effort to continue to build strong interpersonal connections. One example could be that managers encourage talking in person to one another, sharing topics that are related to work and its challenges or just random stories about the past weekend. Several studies demonstrate the importance of storytelling in promoting the growth of implicit knowledge, ensuring that questions are posed regularly and safely, and giving those who perform related tasks the chance to exchange and hone their skills (Dutton & Heaphy, 2016).

Leaders should be aware, that continuous improvement of themselves and their employees is a key to a successful hybrid working environment. Key findings are connected to constant knowledge sharing, good communication, taking time for the employees and recognizing their work, also when not physically together in the office. Leaders are in one sense the mentors of their employees and how they act or approach one situation, will then be mirrored also in the employees and the work itself. With time passing by, employees and their leaders are becoming more and more fluent in the hybrid working model and are learning how to successfully overcome all the prior mentioned challenges, with the help of different, already mentioned strategies. In the practical part of master thesis, the research, we will be able to recognize some other tactics from the real-life examples.

3.4.2 Employees' perspective and strategies

Employees working hybrid have learned, that this requires some special tactics or different approaches to performing the tasks on one hand and on the other, to continue nourishing the relationships and connections with coworkers and managers. As mentioned in the above chapters, employees see advantages in working hybrid as this gives them better control over their time management, they can (mostly) better control their work-life balance and they do not have to commute to work daily. But on the negative side, they can experience the loneliness, when not in the office with their coworkers or they might find it difficult, to build meaningful high-quality connections remotely. Besides tactics for higher productivity in the hybrid work setting, such as to clearly defining your workspace, setting daily and weekly goals, and later sharing the goals or to minimizing the distractions that may affect the quality of work, employees have to take care also, how to foster connections with their coworkers (University of Washington, 2023).

In order to nourish and foster their short term, positive connections, individuals have to take action, which would impact these high-quality connections. Employees have to become more aware of what are their colleagues doing, how are they acting and reacting to certain

situations. And by doing that, if needed, one should provide emotional support, advice or just an ear to listen, when the other side is in need for help. To foster HQCs, employees can use informal practices, such as spontaneous talks, different activities for spending time together or they can also incorporate formal practices, where they can also involve the human resources department or seek for their help and practices. When communicating to one another, employees shall be aware also of their non-verbal behavior, like gestures, facial expressions, what can sometimes tell more than words. Once employee recognizes another employee, by putting themselves in their position or being able to acknowledge the success of others, this positively impacts connections between the two or within the team as a whole. By recognizing one another, expressing affirmation, recognition, being able to give advice but as well taking time for listening, fosters high-quality connections between employees or between employees and managers (Dutton & Heaphy, 2016).

The advantages of hybrid work, when planned and executed well, exceed the difficulties and issues that businesses and employees may face, as nevertheless, hybrid working model significantly increases individual and organizational performance (Madsen, 2011). When it comes to hybrid work and high-quality connections, there are three characteristics that define their importance and urge the need, for employees and managers to work on these connections. Compared to other relationships and exchanges, HQCs have a better potential for carrying emotions, where more emotional expressiveness and wider spectrum of both, happy and sad feelings in a relationship, are indicators of emotional carrying capacity. Furthermore, HQCs have higher degrees of tensity, or the capacity of a relationship to flex and endure pressure of difficulties or disappointments. Lastly, the ability to deflect behaviors that end generative processes and the capability for connectivity—which includes generativity and openness to new ideas and influences—set HQCs apart from other types of partnerships and interactions (Dutton & Ragins, 2017).

4 EMPIRICAL STUDY

The following chapter presents the empirical part of master thesis, with defined goals, research questions and research methodology, where the process, findings and analysis of the researched data are presented, based on each research question.

4.1 Research goals and research questions

The goals of the research are:

- 1) Analyze interpersonal relationships of hybrid employees and how they foster high-quality connections.

- 2) Define possible similarities and differences in aspects or approaches to the topic, between leaders and non-leaders of two different generations, generation X (people born between 1965 and 1979) and Millennial generation (people born between 1980 and 1996).
- 3) Present some practical examples, strategies, that participants find useful in terms of building and fostering connections with their coworkers or with their employees.

The following research questions, were the framework for the empirical part of the master thesis:

- RQ1: What are interpersonal relationship challenges, that employees, working hybrid encounter?
- RQ2: How can employees foster high-quality connections in an international environment?
- RQ3: What are the differences in perceptions of fostering connections in a hybrid model between leaders and non-leaders?

4.2 Research method

Focus groups, or so-called in-depth interviews, are one of the most popular research instruments in the social sciences. Over the years, this research method's status and popularity have grown and focus groups have become a unique component of the qualitative research family in behavioral science research. Nowadays, this research methodology can be held with groups from all over the world and are typically performed via webcams and virtual meetings, such as for example Zoom, Microsoft Teams, etc. (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2015). A focus group offers a detailed understanding of the subject under research. Additionally adaptable and affordable, this approach enables the collection of a substantial volume of qualitative data in a comparatively short length of time. It makes it possible to comprehend participant similarities and differences as well as the experiences and attitudes that result from their interactions on a deeper level (Krueger & Casey, 2015).

When examining a phenomenon using the qualitative technique, open-ended questions are crucial because they let the interviewer to obtain more detailed responses than merely corroborated ones. The pre-prepared questions that served as the foundation for the focus group discussions were ontological because they accurately reflected the members' realities and experiences (Saldana, 2021). When conducting a research, there are numerous forms and variations of qualitative research. As my goal was to get rich and personally unique responses, I have decided to use open-end questions type, when recruiting the participants of the focus group. Rich answers regarding the experiences may be elicited by these questions. After that, you conduct an analysis of the data to generate themes that illustrate various viewpoints on the experiences. Based on these and the fact, that the participants have experienced (and most of them still are) the phenomenon researched, I have used the phenomenological approach to qualitative data analysis (Adu, 2019).

Analytical procedure

The following stages apply, when considering the definition of qualitative coding or analysis: data reduction, subjective procedure, reliability of results, openness of the data analysis process, and logical claims, models, and theories (Adu, 2017). Coding is not the only method of data analysis; it is only one among many. A code is a researcher-generated translation in qualitative data analysis that gives each individual datum meaning for subsequent purposes of pattern discovery, categorization, theory development, and other analytical goals (Saldana, 2021). It is also a systematic, transparent, subjective procedure that reduces data to concepts that are believable, meaningful, and sufficiently represent the facts in order to answer the research questions (Adu, 2016).

Based on the above mentioned, selected phenomenological approach, when conducting the answers from focus groups, I have followed the following steps in coding and analyzing the data gathered (Adu, 2019):

1. To interpret the answers more accurately, I have taken a stock on my experiences and prejudices, by setting them aside.
2. Recording the ideas and concept occurred, while doing the analysis.
3. Preparing the data for further analysis, by reviewing the transcript of all focus groups
4. Deciding on coding strategy and determining the key codes for representing the data
5. Going through the focus groups transcripts and marking the relevant information, comments or observations on which the codes were determined with the purpose of conducting and summarizing the information, without using its meaning and purpose.
6. Creating the themes, according to the generated codes.

In order to systematically code the data collected, I have used two coding strategies, such as description-focused coding and interpretation-focused coding. Selecting the correct coding strategy is of high importance, to be aligning with the research questions and the purpose of the study. This makes it easier to move from coming up with codes to coming up with categories, themes, and even hypotheses (Adu, 2019).

Since the data for encoding was easily accessible, a description-focused technique was employed to encode the information of the majority of association and open-ended inquiries. Participants in focus groups shared their experiences, actions, and behaviors when additional context and interpretation were not required. By condensing and presenting the data exactly as it is, the descriptive coding technique also reduced the likelihood of researcher bias. Furthermore, description-focused coding has the advantage of allowing the data to speak to you without imposing your interpretation or drawing conclusions from what you discover (Adu, 2019). In continuation, I have also employed interpretation-focused coding, in which we identify important information in the data and create a code that reflects our understanding of the information, going beyond simply describing the empirical indicators and instead creating meaning (Adu, 2019). Initially, I gathered each code according to its

appearance in the transcripts of focus groups, where I have put the frequency in brackets next to each code as I have grouped the same codes together. I next created a category out of the collection of merged codes that shared a common point (topic) by sorting them according to frequency of occurrence, which went from most to least significant. Lastly, I have reflected on the participant's overall experience.

4.3 Focus group protocol

When designing the interview guide, I was taking into consideration the differences in focus groups and how should these differences reflect the question setting for each of the focus groups, based on the questions, which I am interested in specific answers and on questions, which are meant for all, to be able to compare the findings.

When planning the focus groups, I have designed the questions for the participants, which have addressed in more details, the research questions identified in section 4.1. Based on the three research questions, I have divided the questionnaire in three sections (the questionnaire can be found among the annexes). At the beginning of each section, the participants were asked to finish a sentence with associations, with the purpose of introduction of the topic and on the other hand, to prepare for the further in-depth open-ended questions discussion.

To be able to conduct a survey, based on the employees experience and therefore being able to analyze the possible similarities and differences in aspects, the research was carried out through four focus groups, where first focus groups were Millennial leaders (born between 1980 and 1996), the second one were Millennial non-leaders (born between 1980 and 1996), the third focus group were Generation X leaders (born between 1965 and 1979) and the fourth focus group being the Generation X non-leaders (born between 1965 and 1979). Each focus group involved 5 participants, which made it easier to be able to collect in depth all the answers and thoughts, during the discussion. All 4 discussions were conducted separately, via conference call through Microsoft teams as the participants work in international companies and some travel for work or are permanently located abroad. Each discussion lasted about an hour.

4.4 Focus group participants

To participate in the research, I have invited participants of both genders, Millennials (born between 1980-1996) and generation X (born between 1965-1979), which are employed as leaders or non-leaders in either Slovenian or international company, that employs the hybrid working model.

All together, there were 20 participants, which were conducted in four focus groups, depending on their age (belonging to either Millennials or generation X) and whether they are leaders or non-leaders. Table 3 presents the general information of generations and in the

tables 4, 5, 6 and 7 below, participants of each focus groups are presented in terms of their pseudonym which they wanted to use, gender, year of birth, age and working position.

Table 3: Generations overview

| Aspect | Millennials | Generation X |
|---------------------|--|--|
| Birth years | 1980 - 1996 | 1965 - 1979 |
| Current age range | 28 – 44 (as of 2024) | 45 – 59 (as of 2024) |
| Key characteristics | Social media generation They rely on technology Collaborative and cooperative Adventurous | Resourceful and independent Maintaining work-life balance Adaptable to change Value individualism |

Source: Howe & Strauss (2003); McKenna (2024).

Table 4: Millennial leaders participants of focus group 1

| Participants pseudonym | Gender | Year of Birth | Age | Working position |
|-------------------------------|---------------|----------------------|------------|-----------------------------------|
| Aka | Male | 1983 | 41 | Marketing manager |
| Maria Lu | Female | 1995 | 29 | Team Lead business administration |
| Katarina | Female | 1991 | 33 | Global finance manager |
| Roland | Male | 1983 | 41 | Director, IT strategy |
| Simon | Male | 1989 | 35 | Service lead in global IT sector |

Source: Own work.

Table 5: Millenial non-leaders paarticipants of focus group 2

| Participants pseudonym | Gender | Year of Birth | Age | Working position |
|-------------------------------|---------------|----------------------|------------|--------------------------|
| Mich | Male | 1991 | 33 | Controller |
| Harry | Male | 1984 | 40 | Cyber security engineer |
| Lora | Female | 1990 | 34 | Accountat |
| Emily | Female | 1983 | 41 | Administrative assistant |
| Xoti | Female | 1980 | 44 | Purchasing analyst |

Source: Own work.

Table 6: Generation X leaders participants of focus group 3

| Participants pseudonym | Gender | Year of Birth | Age | Working position |
|-------------------------------|---------------|----------------------|------------|-------------------------|
| SerenaW | Female | 1974 | 50 | Project manager |
| Joko | Male | 1978 | 46 | Director, Finance |
| Anja | Female | 1970 | 54 | HR manager |
| Amela | Female | 1966 | 58 | Key account manager |
| Willy | Male | 1974 | 50 | General manager |

Source: Own work.

Table 7: Generation X non-leaders participants of focus group 4

| Participants pseudonym | Gender | Year of Birth | Age | Working position |
|-------------------------------|---------------|----------------------|------------|-------------------------|
| Kiko | Male | 1970 | 54 | Finance assistant |
| Manja | Female | 1974 | 50 | Payroll specialist |
| Claudia | Female | 1977 | 47 | HR Generalist |
| Yasya | Female | 1978 | 46 | Billing clerk |
| Leo | Male | 1965 | 59 | Development engineer |

Source: Own work.

Millennial leaders focus group was conducted on Friday, 15th of March 2024 at 13:00, with Millennial non leaders focus group on Thursday 21st of March at 19:00, with Generation X leaders focus group on Friday, 22nd of March at 16:30, and with Generation X non-leaders focus group on Wednesday, 27th of March at 17:00 on the Microsoft Teams platform. Before starting the discussion with each focus groups, I have explained the purpose and goals of the research, how to research will be rolled out and an approximate time we will spend on each topic, to have an approximate time agenda for the participants. I have allowed them to choose freely if they would like to turn on their cameras or would like to participate just with audio. Before starting the atmosphere in all focus groups was very relaxed, positive and many people starting interacting with each other, already before the official start. This was also beneficial when the official discussion started as they were exchanging opinions, experiences and finishing each other sentences and thoughts.

In all four focus groups, I have taken on the role of the moderator, where I was recording the conversation, making notes, and writing transcript of records afterwards. Furthermore, I have used transcript of records for the purposes of organizing the data collected, analysis and coding of answers gathered from the four focus groups, with the aim of paying attention to the differences between leaders and non-leaders answers and how do answers differ in different age groups, or what on the other hand, they may have in common. All the findings will be presented and discussed in the following chapter.

4.5 Presentation of research results

Results gathered from all four focus groups are presented below, according to the type of questions posed and the question/theme itself. Tables with categories and matching codes show the replies from participants in all focus groups. In terms of relevance, the categories with the greatest number of codes (answers) are the most significant, with the most significant categories on the left and the least significant categories on the right.

4.5.1 Associative sentence completion

4.5.1.1 Challenges of working hybrid

First associative sentence completion was, what is for participants of the focus groups, the biggest challenge when working hybrid. Based on the participants answers, I joined them based on the common topic/similarity into categories. The 1st category is the most important one, in case of millennial leaders are these the challenges, connected to communication discrepancies (less spontaneous meetings and conversations being strictly business related). Category 2 presents the collaboration issues, where one millennial leader believes, it is harder to work with each other, when work is being done hybrid. The last category is the category 3, which is related to work-life balance, where one person pointed out the problem

of blurred working hours, meaning that they work more hours, as they would if they would be in office only (presented in table 8).

Table 8: Challenges for millennial leaders

| Category 1: Communication discrepancies (3) | Category 2: Collaboration challenges (1) | Category 3: Work-life balance (1) |
|---|---|--|
| Less spontaneous meetings (1) Communicating only business topics (2) | Harder to work with each other (1) | Blurred working hours (1) |

Source: Own work.

When asking the same question, regarding hybrid work challenges the leaders belonging to generation X, I got slightly different answers. The category 1 was in this case the technology adaptation, as two persons mentioned, they find it difficult, to change often from one digital tool to another. Furthermore, category 2 was in relation to promotion of teamwork, when one leader exposed the issue, that he/she finds it harder to maintain and promote the team spirit, when the team is working hybrid and all around the world. Communication barrier was in this case in category 3, where one person believes, that due to hybrid working model, he/she communicates less with his/her employees and the employees between themselves. Lastly mentioned, is the category 4, which presents the conflicts and how it may be challenging, to manage and solve the conflicts online (presented in table 9).

Table 9: Challenges for Generation X leaders

| Category 1: Technology adaptation (2) | Category 2: Promoting teamwork (1) | Category 3: Communication barriers (1) | Category 4: Managing and solving conflicts (1) |
|--|---|--|--|
| Hard to adapt to new online tools (1) Challenging to switch fast from one digital tool to another (1) | Harder to maintain team spirit, when working hybrid (1) | Talking less with employees and employees between themselves (1) | Challenging to solve escalations online (1) |

Source: Own work.

In contrast to leaders, millennial non-leaders have pointed out slightly different answers. Category 1 is connected to longer working hours (everyday, they work over hours, they need to be available and online all the time as well as to be flexible to others and to adapt to their time or time zone). Unnecessary information sharing and meetings, where pointed out by one person and are part of Category 2 (presented in table 10).

Table 10: Challenges for millennial non-leaders

| Category 1: Longer working hours (4) | Category 2: Unnecessary information and meetings (1) |
|---|---|
| Working more hours, everyday (2) | Unnecessary prescheduled meetings (1) |
| Available all the time (1) | |
| You need to be more flexible to others (1) | |

Source: Own work.

The focus group of Generation X non leaders, mentioned communication issues, which belong to Category 1 (problems building connections with leaders and less time for conversations). The Category 2 was the impulsive stress and in Category 3, person mentioned that for them, the feeling of isolation and loneliness is challenging when working hybrid (presented in table 11).

Table 11: Challenges for Generation X non-leaders

| Category 1: Lack of communication (3) | Category 2: Stress (1) | Category 3: Feeling isolated (1) |
|--|-------------------------------|--|
| Problems building connections with leaders (1) | More impulsive stress (1) | Feeling lonely, isolated when working hybrid (1) |
| Less time for conversations (2) | | |

Source: Own work.

4.5.1.2 *Fostering high-quality connections in hybrid work environment*

The second associative question was related to how employees find high-quality connections with their colleagues. The question is very broad, as the goal was to collect their first thoughts of it and how they see it. I organized answers in 2 categories, where Category 1 summarizes the answers, that find fostering employee connections important (they find it important for organization, how it influences the overall team performance and believe, it should be a goal for every team), which is shown in table 12.

Table 12: Fostering high-quality connections for millennial leaders

| Category 1: Finding it important (3) | Category 2: Finding it challenging (2) |
|---|--|
| Very important for organization (1) | Difficult to achieve and nourish, especially when not interacting everyday (1) |
| Influences the overall team performance (1) | Challenging, as working hybrid and internationally (1) |
| Should be goal for every team (1) | |

Source: Own work.

When analyzing the answers of Generation X leaders (table 13), they have pointed out answers, such as, that fostering high-quality connections with colleagues is important for everyday work and that it is important as it influences the well-being, bringing advantages as well as for employees (coworkers) as for the company itself. All these answers are party of Category 1, which is finding high-quality connections important. The second category, category 2, presents the thought of a leader, which believes that as everyone are working hybrid and all around the world, these connections are hard to achieve and to be fostered as well.

Table 13: Fostering high-quality connections for Generation X leaders

| Category: Finding it important (4) | Category 2: Difficult to achieve (1) |
|--|--|
| Important for everyday work (1) | As everyone are either working hybrid or sitting miles apart, it is hard to achieve strong interpersonal connections (1) |
| Important, as it influences the well-being (2) | |
| These connections are advantage for work and for employees (1) | |

Source: Own work.

Furthermore, millennial non leaders, defined under Category 1, reasons why they believe that companies are active passively, when it comes to fostering high-quality connections (HR should do more about it and leaders are not actively promoting connecting). Category 2 is connected to opinion of employee, which finds these connections important, as they positively influence the feeling of employees, being connected to each other. Category 3 is finding high-quality connections not so important, as according to one’s opinion, this does not bring big differences as each works hybrid and individually (presented in table 14).

Table 14: Fostering high-quality connections for millennial non-leaders

| Category 1: Companies acting passively in relation to it (3) | Category 2 : Important (1) | Category 3: Not so important (1) |
|---|---|--|
| HR should do more about it (1) Leaders are not actively promoting this (2) | Very important, as it makes employees feel more connected (1) | Does not bring big differences, as each works for himself hybrid (1) |

Source: Own work.

The fourth focus groups answers were organized in two categories (table 15). Category 1 represents the answers, where employees believe that the topic is not addressed enough (companies do not speak about it enough, HR is in not actively promoting fostering of high-quality connections so employees don’t know about it and the advantages of it, where also due to a lot of business topics and work, not enough time to work on the employee connections). Category 2 presents the positive effects, some employees express, when thinking of how they find high quality connections (brings better working environment and employees feel better and accepted).

Table 15: Fostering high-quality connections for generation X non-leaders

| Category 1: Not addressed enough (3) | Category 2: Consequences (2) |
|---|---|
| Companies do not speak about it enough (1) As HR is not actively promoting it Lack of time to work on these connections, focus mostly on business (1) | Brings better working environment (1) All feel better and accepted (1) |

4.5.1.3 Positive effects of fostering high-quality connections

When addressing the consequences, employees think of, when it comes to fostering high-quality connections, the answers can be sub organized in two categories (table 16). Category 1 encompasses stronger team spirit, and represents suggestions, that fostering high-quality

connections makes teamwork and collaboration easier and better. Category 2 is wellbeing, where employees' feel better, when they have high-quality connections with their employees, and they also feel like part of the company and its culture.

Table 16: Positive effects of fostering high-quality connections for millennial leaders

| Category 1: Stronger team spirit (3) | Category 2: Well-being (2) |
|---|---|
| Easier teamwork (2) | Employees feel better (1) |
| Better collaboration (1) | Employees feel like part of a company and its culture (1) |

Source: Own work.

The generation X leaders pointed out answers that were sorted in 3 categories, as seen in table 17. Category 1 represents answers, connected to a feeling of belonging to a company, category 2 presents answers, where leaders suggested, that positive effect of fostering high-quality connection is, that once these connections are bounded, it makes it harder for employees to leave the team/company. Category 3, as in the two cases above, presents the aspect of well-being, where one person's opinion states, that the positive effect is that one then feels better and accepted at workplace.

Table 17: Positive effects of fostering high-quality connections for generation X leaders

| Category 1: Feeling of belonging to a company (3) | Category 2: Harder to leave the team/company (1) | Category 3: Well-being (1) |
|--|--|---|
| Employees feel that they belong to the company (1) | Harder to switch team or company because employees are connected to each other (1) | Employees and managers, both feel better and accepted at work (1) |
| Employees are more loyal to the company (2) | | |

Source: Own work.

Table 18 presents aspects on what positive effect, of fostering high-quality connections, millennial non-leaders think of. Category 1 are stronger employee connections (feeling more connected and closer with colleagues, trusting coworkers, better understanding of coworkers and their needs and developing friendships). Category 2, in this case as well, presents Well-being (feeling like you belong somewhere).

Table 18: Positive effects of fostering HQC for millennial non-leaders

| Category 1: Stronger employee connections (4) | Category 2: Well-being (1) |
|--|---------------------------------------|
| Feeling more connected, close with colleagues and manager(s) (1) | Feeling like you belong somewhere (1) |
| Trusting your coworkers (1) | |
| Better understanding of your coworkers and their needs (1) | |
| Developing friendships (1) | |

Source: Own work.

When collecting and analyzing the answers from focus group of generation X non-leaders (in table 19), the category 1, improving communication, was most answered option (employees are more relaxed, when communicating to each other, they solve problems better and sometimes, communicate on private topics as well. Category 2 and 3, are better work performance and well-being, where both have one answer each.

Table 19: Positive effects of fostering HQC for generation X non-leaders

| Category 1: Improving communication (3) | Category 2: Better work performance (1) | Category 3: Well-being (1) |
|--|--|------------------------------------|
| Employees are more relaxed, when communicating to each other (1) | More dedicated to work (1) | Employees like to come to work (1) |
| Better problem solving, due to better communication (1) | | |
| Employees communicate more also privately, non-related to work (1) | | |

Source: Own work.

4.5.2 Open-ended questions

The goal of open-ended questions was, to get insight into the opinions and aspects of all focus groups, when addressing specific question. As I wanted to keep the answers as they are, to be able to make comparisons and conclusions, I gathered them in a table, based on

the question, sub question (discussed) and what each focus group pointed out, being asked these questions. Some questions were intended for all the four focus groups, whereas somewhere more of a specific nature and were divided between leaders and non-leaders of both generations.

4.5.2.1 *Interpersonal relationship challenges, encountered by hybrid employees*

In the table 20 below, the answers from all focus groups are collected, for better comparison possibilities, in the later steps of discussion about similarities and difference between the focus groups. What can be observed already here, is that in terms of interpersonal challenges, which they face in their company, collaboration and teamwork was an answer that was common to them all. Other ones were for example building trust, staying connected, have (un)equal opportunities etc. When addressing the interpersonal challenges, hybrid employees face with their colleagues, the answers were diverse, but most common answer was, that they are not able to develop deeper connections with each other, which leads to having only professional relationships.

Table 20: *Interpersonal relationship challenges of all focus groups*

| | Area 1: Challenges in a company | Area 2: Challenges with colleagues |
|-------------------------------|--|---|
| Millennial leaders | Staying connected (1) Building trust (1) Build strong teams (3) | Not seeing each other daily (1) Being reluctant to ask questions (2) Not developing deeper connections (1) Having only professional relationship (1) |
| Generation X leaders | Promoting teamwork, when not working physically together (3) Not meeting for a coffee (1) Being reserved (1) | Feeling isolated one from another (2) Not developing deeper connections (2) Not communicating regularly and solving issues (1) |
| Millennial non-leaders | Collaboration issues (4) Unequal opportunities (1) | Not feeling close to each other (3) Not sharing information (2) |

To be continued

Table 20: Interpersonal relationship challenges of all focus groups (cont.)

| | Area 1: Challenges in a company | Area 2: Challenges with colleagues |
|---------------------------------|---|---|
| Generation X non-leaders | Challenges due to cultural differences (1) No conflict resolution (1) Collaboration challenges (2) Not knowing people from other teams, as not meeting in person (1) | Too professional relationship (only) (3) Not knowing your colleagues good enough (1) Differences in work preferences and expectations (1) |

Source: Own work.

Leaders of both focus groups, millennials, and generation X, were asked about the interpersonal relationship challenges, they encounter with their employees and when it comes to maintaining communication with them (table 21). The most common answer was the asynchronous communication, which may be the result of part of employees working on site and part from home, or that virtually, people are not able to see the gestures and non-verbal actions of another person, which makes it more difficult, for interpretation of one's attitude or answer itself. Both groups pointed out, the challenge of trust with their employees.

Table 21: Interpersonal relationship challenges of leaders

| | Area 1: Challenges with between employees | Area 2: Challenges of maintaining communication |
|-----------------------------|---|--|
| Millennial leaders | Exclusion of remote employees (2) Building relationships (2) Building trust (1) | Asynchronous communication between employees on site and in office (3) Miscommunication (1) Keeping regular, spontaneous communication (1) |
| Generation X leaders | Conflict resolution (2) Collaboration (2) Trust issues (1) | Prescheduled meeting (1) Difficult, as you don't see the gestures of another person (2) |

Table 21: Interpersonal relationship challenges of leaders (cont.)

| | Area 1: Challenges with between employees | Area 2: Challenges of maintaining communication |
|-----------------------------|--|---|
| Generation X leaders | | Different communication tools (1) Miscommunication (1) |

Source: Own work.

Millennial and generation X non-leaders were asked, about interpersonal relationship challenges, they encounter with their manager and when it comes to teamwork and collaboration. Mostly pointed out was the challenge of lack of communication, which influences also other things, such as trust issues, no regular contact, employees being afraid to ask and approach their managers etc. Communication was pointed out also as key challenge, when it comes to collaboration and working within team, as both groups marked it as an issue, when working hybrid. Also, other answers/ideas were collected and are presented in table 22, below.

Table 22: Interpersonal relationship challenges of non-leaders

| | Area 1: Challenges with managers | Area 2: Challenges with collaboration/teamwork |
|---------------------------------|---|--|
| Millennial non-leaders | No regular contact (2) Not having deeper relationship (1) Not knowing each other well (1) Misunderstanding the information, because of not seeing the other person (1) | Hard, not to make someone feel left out (the hybrid worker) (2) Maintaining good communication (1) Challenging, to make everyone feel like part of the team as they did not meet in person (1) Building trust (1) |
| Generation X non-leaders | Not feeling so close your manager at (1) Afraid to ask questions (1) Building trust (2) Feeling connected (1) | Trusting your team members, that they will perform job as best they can (3) Solving conflicts (1) Equality (1) |

4.5.2.2 Fostering high-quality connections in an international environment

In this section, we firstly addressed the question, why are high-quality connections with and between colleagues important, as presented in table 23. Most answered, was the improved communication, for all focus groups which belongs to category 1. After it, was the better teamwork and the overall employee well-being. Individual answers, based on the focus group are presented in table below. To point out and will be discussed later in the discussion section is that the overall well-being, as an advantage of fostering high-quality connections was mentioned from all focus group, but one – generation X leaders.

Table 23: Importance of high-quality connections with colleagues

| | Category 1: Improved communication | Category 2: Better teamwork | Category 3: Overall well-being |
|---------------------------------|---|---|---------------------------------------|
| Millennial leaders | Communicating more openly (2) Easier to approach your colleagues (1) | Better team results (1) | Feeling accepted (1) |
| Generation X leaders | Improved communication (1) Asking questions (1) Building trust (1) | Better teamwork (1) Feeling of belonging to a team (1) | |
| Millennial non-leaders | Open communication (2) Not afraid to ask questions (1) | Teams are more connected (1) | Well-being of all employees (1) |
| Generation X non-leaders | Regular contact (1) Communicating in a more friendly way (1) Honest conversations (1) | Improved teamwork (1) | In general, feeling better (1) |

Source: Own work.

But how are these connections influenced in a hybrid working environment? That was the question for all participants, of all the four focus groups and their answers were either that the HQC are influenced positively, negatively, or not at all. Most participants have thought off the negative impacts, such as the communication and

contact challenges, relationship building difficulties, trust issues etc. Others have pointed out also some negative aspects, such as that in hybrid working environment HQC are for example becoming less flexible. Millennial focus groups, leaders and non-leaders mentioned, that these connections, for one, are not influenced by hybrid work at all. Which on the contrary, the Generation X participants, did not mention (presented in table 24).

Table 24: How hybrid work influences HQC in an international environment

| | Category 1: Negatively | Category 2: Positively | Category 3: Not influenced |
|---------------------------------|---|--|---------------------------------------|
| Millennial leaders | Challenging communication (3) | Relationships becoming more flexible (1) | No changes (1) |
| Generation X leaders | Less contact (1) No strong connections (1) Difficult communication (1) | Increased digital interaction (1) New opportunities (1) | |
| Millennial non-leaders | Challenging relationship building (2) Only professional relationship (1) | More opportunities (1) | No impact, this is the new normal (1) |
| Generation X non-leaders | Less contact with coworkers or manager (2) Challenging to openly communicate (1) Difficult to balance work and personal connections, when constantly connected online (1) | More time for personal talks, online (1) | |

Source: Own work.

When participants were asked, what actions do they undertake, when it comes to encouraging high-quality connections, they answers were either connected to the communication building and nourishment or to the workshops and team buildings, that are organized virtually, and they often attend them. Some suggested also other strategies, which can be found under the Category 3, other, as shown in table 25 below.

Table 25: Actions taken, to encourage fostering of HQC

| | Category 1: Nourishing communication | Category 2: Workshops/Team buildings | Category 3: Other |
|---------------------------------|---|---|--|
| Millennial leaders | Regular team meetings (2) One-on-one meetings with employees (1) | Organizing workshops with fairness committee, to learn some tactics (1) | Have a collaboration day, where everyone come to the office, once a week (1) |
| Generation X leaders | Active listening (1) Collaborative projects (1) Regular communication (1) | Virtual team buildings (1) | Embracing diversity (1) |
| Millennial non-leaders | Virtual coffee breaks (1) Continuous communication (1) | Attending the virtual team buildings (2) | Networking (1) |
| Generation X non-leaders | Virtual meetings with managers (2) Meetings with the team, to discuss open topics (1) Listening to my coworkers needs (1) | Participating in online workshops, organized by the company (1) | |

Source: Own work.

In table 26, answers from leaders' strategies on encouraging team connections are presented. Category 1 is promoting collaboration, where both focus groups mentioned it as important (virtual team meetings, collaboration projects etc.) Category number 2 is providing support, where leaders believe in strategy of continuous support for improvement and being ready to help to your employees. Millennial leaders have also mentioned the strategy of encouraging feedback, where they promote open dialogue, which was coded as Category number 3.

Table 26: Strategies of leaders, for encouraging strong team connections

| | Category 1: Promoting collaboration | Category 2: Providing support | Category 3: Encourage feedback |
|-----------------------------|--|---|--|
| Millennial leaders | Organizing regular team meetings (1) Virtual collaboration projects (1) Promoting teamwork (1) | Being always helpful (1) | Promoting open dialogue (1) |
| Generation X leaders | More teamwork tasks (2) Team buildings (1) Promoting cooperation also with other teams (1) | Continuous support for improvement (1) | |

Source: Own work.

From the perspective of non-leading employees, managers, in category 1 and human resources department in category 2, present the most important role when it comes to promoting and encouraging high-quality connections. One participant of the Millennial non focus group has also mentioned, that company itself should stand for this as a value and promote building of these connections (presented in table 27).

Table 27: Who plays an important role in encouraging HQCs

| | Category 1: Managers | Category 2: Human resources department | Category 3: Other |
|---------------------------------|--------------------------------|---|--------------------------|
| Millennial non-leaders | Leaders (3) | Human resources department (1) | Company itself (1) |
| Generation X non-leaders | Managers (4) | Human resources employees (1) | |

Source: Own work.

4.5.2.3 *Differences in perceptions of fostering connections in a hybrid model between leaders and non-leaders*

Each employee sees the situation from its own perspective and that was the case as well in this section, where we addressed, what is in their opinion, human resources department or their company in general doing, to promote high-quality connections between the employees. In table 28, the answers are coded in 4 categories, the first one being most answered one, from all focus groups – virtual meetings (chat roulette meetings, online coffee or team meetings). Second category was employee events (Hiking trips, Bowling, games afternoon etc.). Categories 3 and 4 were the least answered and are workshops/trainings and proper infrastructure such as socializing cubes for example.

Table 28: Practical examples for fostering HQC (from HR)

| | Category 1: Virtual meetings | Category 2: Employee events | Category 3: Workshops/trainings | Category 4: Proper infrastructure |
|---------------------------------|---|---|--|---|
| Millennial leaders | Chat roulette meetings (2) Coffee meetings (1) | Spring fest (1) Going hiking together (1) | | |
| Generation X leaders | Virtual meetings (1) | Games afternoon (1) Bowling (1) Christmas party (1) | Online trainings (1) | |
| Millennial non-leaders | Virtual coffee dates (1) Virtual teams' games (1) HR meetings in smaller groups, to talk about everything (1) | Team hiking (1) | Educational workshops, with different guests (1) | |
| Generation X non-leaders | Virtual team building (1) Weekly team meetings (1) | BBQ event (1) | Attending online trainings, on topics, how to work with your colleagues, for example (1) | Socializing cubes (1) |

Source: Own work.

Furthermore, leaders were asked about their perception of fostering high-quality connections in a hybrid working environment, where the category 1 is the strategic perspective (they see HQCs as improver of team cohesion, increased productivity, morale etc.), Category 2 is promoting team diversity and Category 3 is the importance of education and trainings, when it comes to fostering connections and relationships at work (presented in table 29).

Table 29: Leaders perception of fostering HQC in hybrid environment

| | Category 1: Strategic perspective | Category 2: Promoting team diversity | Category 3: Importance of education and trainings |
|-----------------------------|--|--|--|
| Millennial leaders | Improving team cohesion (1) Increased productivity (1) Increased morale (1) | Aiming to promote participation across different work settings (1) | Leaders see the success in expanding knowledge (1) |
| Generation X Leaders | Strategically important, to foster connection as this influences the work environment (1) Improves team results (1) Leaders can have closer connections to their employees (1) | | Leaders should be trained on these topics (1) Leaders should attend development workshops, every year to be able to promote building connections within team(s) (1) |

Source: Own work.

When addressing the topic, what kind of experiences should leaders possess, to be able to nurture relationships, the answers were summarized in four categories, using coding. Category 1 are communication skills, where most of employees agree on that matter. Category 2 is conflict resolution (striving to solve issues and conflicts). Category 3, Being motivational and Category 4, team buildings are the least answered one and are not presented in detail. All answers are gathered in table 30 below.

Table 30: Experiences of leaders, necessary to nurture relationships in a hybrid model

| | Category 1: Communication skills | Category 2: Conflict resolution | Category 3: Motivational | Category 4: Team building |
|-----------------------------|--|--|--|-------------------------------------|
| Millennial leaders | Good communication skills (2) | Striving to solve issues (1) | Should be able to motivate the team (1) | Fostering team collaboration (1) |
| Generation X leaders | Strong communication skills (3) | Solve conflicts in a team and across teams (1) | Know how to motivate his/her employees (1) | |

Source: Own work.

From the perspective of non-leaders, leaders could take some actions, to promote the high-quality connections (shown in table 31). Category 1 is promoting open communication, where leaders should be open for conversation, and they should be promoting the importance of it. In Category 2, non-leaders believe that it would be beneficial if leaders would organize team building activities. Categories 3 and 4 present the promotion of informal interactions and that leaders should lead by example.

Table 31: How can leaders help to foster HQCs, from non-leaders perspective

| | Category 1: Promote open communication | Category 2: Team-building activities | Category 3: Promote informal interactions | Category 4: Lead by example |
|---------------------------------|--|--|---|--|
| Millennial non-leaders | Leader should be open to conversations (2) | Regular team building (1) Team tasks (1) | Coffee breaks, all together (1) | |
| Generation X non-leaders | Open communication (1) Promoting the importance of honest, direct communication (1) | Team building events, workshops (1) | (Virtual) team gathering (lunches, coffees) (1) | Leaders need to show the importance of connections and act according to it (1) |

Source: Own work.

Both focus groups of non-leaders had suggestions and ideas on what they can undertake every day, to encourage building strong relationship with their coworkers and with their

managers. Their answers are presented in table 32, but are summarized in 3 categories: being collaborative, being open to other people and being proactive.

Table 32: Building strong relationships among colleagues and with managers

| | Category 1: Being collaborative | Category 2: Being open to other people | Category 3: Be proactive |
|---------------------------------|---|---|---------------------------------|
| Millennial non-leaders | Participating in team activities (1) Collaborating with others (1) Willing to work together (1) | Initiate conversation (1) Be a good listener (1) | |
| Generation X non-leaders | Actively participating in activities (1) Being a team player (1) | Communicate effectively (1) Offer help (1) | Take initiative in a team (1) |

Source: Own work.

5 DISCUSSION

The following section outlines the main conclusions in relation to the research questions, the findings from the qualitative data analysis, the coding and categorization of the four focus groups' responses, which serve as the foundation for practice recommendations, the research's limitations and contributions, and the conclusion.

5.1 Summary of research results

At the beginning, pros and cons of the hybrid work were described, where in continuation, we focused more on the interpersonal high-quality connections and how are these connected to the hybrid work and international environment. By defining the four focus groups, and understanding their characteristics, we can analyze their answers, searching for similarities and differences, to the perception of fostering high-quality connections, how can this be nourished and who play an important role. In the table 33, are presented the most important categories regarding interpersonal relationship challenges, how can high-quality connections

be fostered and the differences in perception of fostering these connections, in hybrid model, between leaders and non-leaders.

Table 33: Summary of findings

| | Millennial leaders (important categories) | Generation X leaders (important categories) | Millennial non-leaders (important categories) | Generation X non-leaders (important categories) |
|---|---|--|--|--|
| INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIP CHALLENGES | | | | |
| In a company | Communication discrepancies Building trust | Being reserved Not meeting for a coffee | Collaboration issues | Collaboration challenges Feeling isolated No conflict resolution |
| With your colleagues | Collaboration challenges Only professional relationship | Communication barriers Managing and solving conflicts | Feeling left out Not sharing information | Not knowing your colleagues good enough Only professional relationship |
| FOSTERING HIGH-QUALITY CONNECTIONS | | | | |
| Importance | Overall team performance Important for organization | Important for everyday work Influences well-being | Makes employees feel more connected Leaders and HR should promote it more | Better working environment Better well-being |
| How are they influenced by hybrid work | Challenging communication Relationships becoming more flexible | Less contact Difficult communication Increased digital interaction | Challenging relationship building More opportunities | Less contact with coworkers and managers Challenging communication More time for online personal discussions |
| Encouraging HQC with colleagues | Nourishing communication | Virtual meetings Continuous communication | Workshop/team building | Listening to coworker needs |

To be continued

Table 33: Summary of findings (cont.)

| | Millennial leaders (important categories) | Generation X leaders (important categories) | Millennial non-leaders (important categories) | Generation X non-leaders (important categories) |
|----------------------------------|--|---|---|---|
| DIFFERENCES IN PERCEPTION | | | | |
| Strategies in a company | Organizing regular meetings Promoting teamwork Being helpful | Team building Team tasks Collaboration with other teams | Virtual events Educational workshops | Weekly team meetings Online activities Socializing space in a company |

Source: Own work.

What is common to all focus group, is the importance of communication, that it should be regular, nourished, and open. But the difference is that mostly leaders have mentioned the importance of teamwork and collaboration across different teams and non-leaders, millennial and generation X, have had more focus on the overall well-being. All four focus groups believe that the fostering of high-quality connections is important, for several different aspects and that more time and action should be undertaken, when addressing this topic. Non-leaders believe that the HR and managers play a crucial role here and that they should promote interpersonal relationships and strong connections, more. All focus group participants see virtual connections as both, positive from one side and negative from the other. On one hand, they believe that this digital connectivity, brings more open possibilities where individuals can gather and communicate but on the other hand, miss the in-person bonding at a regular coffee break, attending the activities together and building personal connections, besides only professional.

Research question 1 focused on interpersonal relationship challenges, that employees, working hybrid encounter. Millennial leaders have mentioned that for them, the main challenges are communication discrepancies and collaboration challenges, where also other 3 focus groups, agreed on that matter, which aligns also with the theory of power of high-quality connections discussed in the theoretical section above (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003). Both leaders, millennials, and generation X, have mentioned mainly the communication, collaboration, and teamwork issues, whereas non-leaders' answers were mainly focused on their feelings, such as feelings of being left out, feeling of loneliness or feeling that they are not close enough to their coworkers. When going deeper in discussions, leaders were asked to think about interpersonal challenges they face between their employees and when it comes to maintaining communication. Millennial leaders have pointed out the challenge and

importance of building trust within the team, to be able to work better and feel better, which would also bring better and stronger relationships between employees. This is something that millennial leaders strive for, when leading a group. On the other hand, they are facing asynchronous communications with employees working on site on with employees, being present in the office. Later, we came to this question again, but from the strategical and practical perspective, what are they as leaders, and companies doing, to overcome that, which will be presented in research question 3. Generation X leaders, have in addressing the same question, mentioned the challenges of miscommunication and trust issues as well, but pointed out the problems of conflict resolution. They find maintaining communication difficult as you don't see the gestures of other person, when communicating hybrid, for example without camera, where some also mentioned that they find it beneficial, when online (Zoom, Microsoft Teams) meeting are involving audio and video as this makes it much easier to communicate and understand the other person as well.

When conducting the analysis, from the perspective of both focus groups of non-leaders, they also agree with the issues encountered because of lack of regular communication, which influences also other areas, such as trust, closeness to their managers and being open to ask questions and discuss different topics. When it comes to collaboration and teamwork, millennial non-leaders find it hard to make someone not feel left out as on one hand, some employees are working hybrid and on the other, some are located miles apart and this influences the flow of the collaboration, communication, and successfulness of teamwork itself.

To summarize the research question 1, we can notice that all four focus groups find it difficult to communicate with each other, when working hybrid, which influences the relationships they have, either with their colleagues and with their managers. They would like to have stronger relationships, which would be based on trust, overall well-being and understanding of each other, where none of the employees would feel left out. Even if the technology itself brings a lot of advantages, interpersonal challenges are harder to overcome, when employees are not seeing each other daily or regularly, spontaneously in person meeting for a coffee, but with virtual meetings, everything becomes more structured, decided in advance and the topics are already predetermined. It is less space and time for spontaneous interactions, which would foster their connections.

Research question 2 analyzed, how can employees foster high-quality connections in an international environment. Firstly, all focus groups were asked about why they find high-quality connections with their colleagues important, where all focus groups agreed, that fostering high-quality connections, positively impacts the communication, teamwork and well-being, which was all in the first research question mentioned as challenging, when working hybrid. They believe, that building high-quality connections with colleagues, brings stronger trust, open communication, honest conversations, and better team connectivity.

When addressing high-quality connections in the context of hybrid work, all participants have found both, positive and negative sides of it. Only millennials, leaders and non-leaders have pointed out as well, that they don't see the influence or connectivity between the hybrid work and the high-quality connection, where in generation X, leaders, and non-leaders, that mentioned either only positive or negative effects of hybrid work on high-quality connections between the colleagues.

When it comes to actively encouraging the fostering of high-quality connections, all focus groups have agreed, that it is important to nourish the communication. The approaches and actions taken, by that, were different for every focus group. Millennial leaders pointed out the importance of regular team meetings and one-on-one meetings, where employees would be given a chance to speak and openly communicate about every concern they may have, and leaders should strive to build the trust, for a strong, honest working environment. Even if hybrid working model brings additional challenges, they should all strive to find a balance, where they would enjoy the benefits of hybrid working but would as well nourish relationships and connections, in an international environment. Furthermore, Generation X leaders have had similar suggestions, such as collaborative team projects and to encourage active listening, which would lead to better, two-way communication. Millennial and generation X non-leaders suggested virtual team meetings, as an advantage for better connectivity and communication with other employees, where they could discuss several different topics, listen to each other and consequently, be able to help one another more. They believe, that when working hybrid, the power of technology has to be used in a best way possible, and attending virtual meetings, that are not strictly related to business topics but to the employees, is highly beneficial for everyone.

Generation X leaders are focusing on strategy of promoting collaboration and providing support, by being always helpful, promoting teamwork and teamwork projects, which would help build stronger relationships within and across different teams in an international hybrid work environment. Millennial leaders have as well agreed on these two strategies but are as well following the strategy of encouraged and open feedback, where they strive to actively promote open dialog between employees and between employees and their managers.

It is crucial, that leaders are aware of the importance high-quality connections bring and that their fostering and promoting, leads to a success on many different levels. Non-leaders see managers as a main person responsible for encouraging these connections, followed by the human resources department, where all should work on employee well-being, strong high-quality connections and pleasant hybrid working environment. Leaders and human resources department, as well as the company itself should be open for suggestions and needs of their employees, which may struggle to adapt to the challenges hybrid and international environment bring.

Research question 3 analyzed the differences in perceptions of fostering high-quality connections in a hybrid model, between leaders and non-leaders. Firstly, I was interested in

practical examples from their companies, and what strategies they use to promote the fostering of high-quality connections. All four focus groups believe that also HR should promote and organize more virtual meetings, such as for example the chat roulette, where they meet every second week and employees are consequently sorted in pairs, where they have 15 minutes to get to know each other, talk about work and non-work-related topics and create foundations for a possible, future colleague relationship. All also agreed on virtual team buildings, where employees from all around the world would be able to join and participate in the virtual games, discussions, and possible workshops, but here, it would be important that once such (virtual) events are organized, employees are willing to join and actively participate in them. Non-leaders of Generation X have also suggested that human resources department should strive to build proper infrastructure within the company, such as socializing cubes, where employees could meet for a coffee, meeting or to just relax and hang out a bit.

Millennial leaders see the fostering of high-quality connections as strategically important, as by doing so, they will increase the productivity of their employees and build stronger team cohesion. Generation X leaders agreed on the strategic perspective and mentioned the importance these HQCs bring on the work environment and the results of the work, but to achieve that, leaders have to have closer connections with their employees, where they would listen and recognize their needs and will be able to act accordingly. Both focus groups of leaders are as well sharing the perception of the importance of education and trainings, where leaders have to constantly educate and improve themselves, to be able to promote it further to their employees. When the leaders will understand the theoretical background and the advantages of fostering high-quality connections in their team, they will be able to teach that also others, show them some examples and adapt their working and leading model according to that. Furthermore, millennial leaders see HQCs as a tool, that would promote participation across different teams, that may also be located internationally, but would still feel connected to each other. When discussing the importance of well-educated and trained leaders, leaders themselves believe, that they should have good communication skills, that they should be able to solve conflicts, by striving to solve issues promptly. Furthermore, they should also be motivational as without their faith in the process and importance HQCs bring, they cannot project this on their employees, every leader's goal should be to have motivated employees, that are also able to motivate others in the team. Not that this only builds stronger relationships within the team but also brings better results and overall team performance.

On the other hand, non-leaders believe, that by promoting open communication, more informal interactions and teambuilding activities, leaders can help to foster high-quality connections. Non-leaders see the success in open conversations, which would be based on honesty and trust. As well here, they mention the team coffee-breaks, as a type of informal gathering, as well as for example team lunches/dinners. The truth is, that in a hybrid, international environment, these actions may be more challenging, but there are several different options to overcome distance disparities. For example, coffee break could be also

sometimes online, held virtually, for all the team members, where they could all take a break from daily activities and just relax in a spontaneous conversation with coworkers. If possible, leaders should also focus on organizing events (team buildings, workshops), where at least once a year, all employees from one team could meet in person. They believe that this would be strong fundamental for further relationship development and that it would then be easier to continue the communication online once you already know the person in person as well. Non-leaders of generation X have also mentioned that leaders need to show the importance of interpersonal connections to their employees, and they should be an example and that they should also lead the team by that example.

To have strong high-quality connections, both sides need to cooperate and work together, leaders and non-leaders. As above mentioned, leaders should be actively involved in all the processes and should also promote this further, but non-leaders also play an important role here. They should be collaborative, which means that they should participate in activities organized by leaders or the HR, they should be willing to collaborate and work with others, also if sometimes they believe they may be faster doing the task alone. Furthermore, they should be open to other people, by listening to each other, initiating the conversation and offer the help when needed. Sometimes, especially in hybrid work environment, employees struggle to ask for help, to ask questions and by having strong connections and knowing each other well, the team can overcome this fear, of asking questions.

In conclusion, the analysis of interpersonal interaction difficulties in a hybrid work setting, has illuminated the difficulties experiences by leaders and non-leaders in millennial and generation X generations. All things considered, poor communication, obstacles to teamwork, and loneliness have become the main issues. Leaders—millennials in particular—emphasized how important it is for teams to develop trust to increase output and cultivate better bonds. But accomplishing this is made more difficult by the asynchronous nature of hybrid communication and the lack of face-to-face encounters.

Notwithstanding the difficulties, everyone agrees on the need of having strong relationships with coworkers. These relationships are seen to be crucial for improving wellbeing generally, teamwork, and communication. Techniques put forth by leaders and non-leaders alike, like virtual get-togethers, team meetings on a regular basis, and cooperative projects, are meant to close the gap that hybrid work arrangements cause. Through proactive participation, honest communication, and setting a positive example, leaders are essential in fostering these relationships.

Going forward, it is critical that companies give top priority to programs that enable meaningful relationships amongst staff members, irrespective of their position in the hierarchy. To achieve this, leaders and non-leaders must work together to foster an environment that values transparency, cooperation, and support for one another. Through efficient use of technology and creative strategies, like online team-building exercises and organized communication channels, companies can lessen the difficulties presented by

mixed work environments and foster the deeper human relationships that are essential for long-term success.

5.2 Research contributions

The research contributes firstly to the better understanding of high-quality connections and their importance, supporting the ideas and findings aligned with the literature of High-quality connections (Stephens et al., 2011). To be able to understand the importance of it, we firstly need to know the challenges, working environment and model currently bring and what can be better done, to overcome them and to build a clear path forward.

Through examining the viewpoints of various focus groups, the study pinpoints typical issues that workers in hybrid work environments encounter. These difficulties, which include poor communication, obstacles to teamwork, and feelings of loneliness, offer important insights into the intricacies of contemporary work arrangements. Furthermore, the research provides insights into leadership perspectives. In order to shed light on their methods and worries about interpersonal interactions in hybrid work contexts, the research digs into the viewpoints of leaders who belong to the Generation X and millennial generations. Comprehending the distinct obstacles that leaders encounter in cultivating trust, communication, and collaboration offers significant direction for corporate leadership development and training initiatives.

As most importantly, the research shows the importance of fostering of high-quality connections, whereby analyzing the challenges and different employee opinions, on the other hand research also brings up some practical strategies for improvement. By investigating high-quality connections, relationships amongst coworkers, the study emphasizes how important these relationships are for improving teamwork, communication, and general wellbeing. This acknowledgment highlights how important it is to have solid interpersonal ties in order to accomplish organizational objectives and increase worker happiness and engagement.

5.3 Research limitations

As mentioned above, the research method used were four focus groups, on which the analysis was conducted. None of the researches can provide exact data and answers, what would be best to implement in practice, and none of the researches can't be use to generalize the whole group. Even if we do use theoretical background and empirical results, we are able to assume what each focus group does and needs, in order to foster high-quality connections, but in reality, in ever day life the circumstances and the approaches may differ. Fostering of high-quality connections is influenced also by the company, home environment and the already existing relationships with colleagues, one has. Therefore, some suggestions may be useful for one company and may not be applicable to the other.

Limitation of the research, using focus group is that it requires trained, experienced moderator, which will structurally lead the conversation and with whom the participants will build trust and will be willing to openly share more information. The quality of the discussion and consequently of the data gathered, depends on the moderator and his/her skills (John Hopkins University, 2022). In this exact case, I was in a role of moderator for the first time, and I did not have any prior experience, to lead group conversation for research purposes. The researcher must also determine how to analyze and encode any significant or small passages in the text that provide pertinent information. Compared to an individual approach, a group-based code-screening process might offer more ideas for classifying codes and establish the final categories based on a consensus that would be the result of multiple people rather than simply the opinion of one researcher. (Adu, 2019)

Another limitation of the research is, that focus groups were conducted online, via virtual meetings. If the meetings would be in person, it would be easier to get to know each other better, before the research, which may lead to a more relaxed and open research conversation. Furthermore, many participants felt more comfortable with having their cameras turned off, where I was not able to read and note their gestures, which would help interpret some of the answers. If the focus groups would be held live, in person, this part would be easier and would bring an advantage to the analysis.

Furthermore, the data may be difficult to analyze as the individual opinion may differ from that of a group, meaning that it's possible that the sample isn't typical of the population (John Hopkins University, 2012).

6 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the exploration of fostering high-quality employee connections in a hybrid work setting has given me important new perspectives on the workings of modern organizations. By investigating different approaches, difficulties, and consequences, I have uncovered the nuances involved in handling human interactions in the digital era.

The main research question was, how can employees foster high-quality connections in an international hybrid environment. The findings of the master thesis show, that employees must take a holistic approach, concentrating on interpersonal relationship issues, actively promoting communication and collaboration, and developing trust within the team in order to generate high-quality relationships in an international hybrid workplace. Understanding cultural variations and individual dynamic that may influence interactions is necessary to address these difficulties. Employees may improve teamwork and close gaps by emphasizing regular and open communication, making sure that every member of the team feels appreciated and involved. The theory and practice apply, that mutual respect and openness are the corestones of the effective teamwork, where establishing and maintaining these high-quality connections will be crucial for the success of both, the team and the company itself.

The findings of my research highlight the need of making deliberate attempts to foster meaningful connections among employees, irrespective of their geographical location. With the help of analyzing the four focus groups, I was able to connect the practice with theory and see some strategical, practical examples, why is fostering of high-quality connections important and what are companies already doing, to promote it. Furthermore, I've learned how businesses may close the gap between remote and in-person workers by using technology to promote communication, collaboration, and relationship-building. This creates a cohesive and inclusive work culture.

Research question 1 focused on interpersonal relationship challenges, that employees, working hybrid encounter, such as communication discrepancies, collaboration, and communication challenges as well as the feeling of being left out and not being closely connected to their coworkers. In continuation, research question 2 analyzed, how can employees foster high-quality connections in an international environment. The answers provided were mostly associated with having honest conversations, participating in events and workshops which encourage building interpersonal relationships, nourishing communication, etc. Lastly, I was interested in analyzing differences in perceptions of fostering high-quality connections in a hybrid mode, between leaders and non-leaders, which was covered under research question 3. Non-leaders believe that the key is in promoting open communication, more informal interactions and teambuilding activities, whereas leaders are more prompt to follow guidelines provided by human resources department and formal ways of gatherings.

The theory and practical research show, that leaders who place a high value on trust-building, empathy, and communication can motivate their teams to be more engaged, productive, and satisfied, which consequently fosters high-quality connections.

There is no one fix strategy, the company and its employees, leaders and non-leaders should follow to achieve the high-quality connections. It depends on the individuals, company itself and how active the other departments, such as for example human resources, for promoting activities that help to foster these connections. Each leader has to recognize the needs of his/her employees and the needs of the company, to be able to show this also to employees, that they all, as a team can strive to build strong connections. Based on the research results, it is beneficial that managers, together with human resources department take over the initiative and organize some events, workshops, or virtual meetings, where employees from all around the world could gather and share their thoughts, fears, experiences and many more. With such actions, employees are encouraged to connect one with other and foster high-quality connections.

By developing and fostering high-quality employee connections, employees feel more empowered, connected, accepted and motivated, which positively affects the company and its performance as well.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Povzetek (Summary in Slovene language)

Redni stiki z ljudmi in sodelavci pripomorejo k razvoju močnih vezi. Njihov celovit vodnik za pridobivanje pozitivnega ozračja na delovnem mestu je zasnovan na treh ključnih poteh do kakovostne povezanosti: olajševanje nalog, spoštljivo sodelovanje in zaupanje (Dutton, 2023). Odnosi na delovnem mestu so bistvenega pomena za kakovost našega življenja in tudi za opravljanje dela ter se tako kot druge vrste medsebojnih odnosov razlikujejo po kakovosti. Kadar delujejo dobro, so lahko ustvarjalen vir učenja, energije in obogatitve, ki spodbujajo razvoj, dobro počutje in širitev ljudi, skupnosti in organizacij. V najslabšem primeru so lahko jedek in strupen vir nelagodja, izčrpanosti in nepravilnega delovanja (Dutton & Ragins, 2017). Zaposleni tradicionalno vsakodnevno komunicirajo iz oči v oči, pristop k spodbujanju teh povezav pa je nekoliko drugačen v organizacijah, ki uporabljajo hibridni model dela, pri katerem ljudje nekaj časa preživijo skupaj v pisarni, nekaj časa v domači pisarni, nekateri pa se zaradi fizične oddaljenosti poslovnih prostorov vidijo ali slišijo le prek spleta.

V magistrski nalogi sem raziskovala, kako lahko zaposleni na globalnem, hibridnem delovnem mestu gojijo smiselne odnose. Glavni cilj je razumeti taktike in dejavnosti, ki so potrebne za spodbujanje teh odnosov. Glavne ugotovitve kažejo, da je potrebna celovita strategija, ki poudarja vprašanja medosebne interakcije, spodbuja timsko delo in komunikacijo ter gradi zaupanje.

Za premagovanje teh ovir je treba temeljito razumeti kulturne razlike in osebno dinamiko, ki vplivajo na komunikacijo. Spodbujanje timskega dela in zagotavljanje, da se vsak član ekipe počuti cenjenega in vključenega, zahteva redno in iskreno komunikacijo. Študija poudarja, da sta odprta komunikacija in medsebojno spoštovanje bistvena elementa produktivnega timskega dela. Magistrsko delo predstavlja pomemben vpogled v probleme medosebne interakcije, ki ovirajo razvoj visoko kakovostnih vezi, in predstavlja izvedljive rešitve, vključno s spodbujanjem timskega dela, komunikacijo, pogostimi timskimi sestanki, vajami za krepitev ekipe in delavnicami. Opozarja tudi na razlike v pogledu vodij in nevodij na te odnose ter poudarja, kako ključna je ta dinamika za uspeh tima in organizacije.

Appendix 2: Focus groups questionnaire

Questions for participants of the focus groups

What are interpersonal relationship challenges, that employees, working hybrid encounter? – 15 min

The biggest challenge, working hybrid is _____

What interpersonal relationship challenges, do you encounter, when working hybrid?

Questions for all

- In your company?
- With your colleagues?
- What does for you, building connections with colleagues mean?

Questions for leaders

- With your employees?
- In the area of maintaining communication?

Questions for non-leaders

- With your manager(s)?
- In the area of cooperation/teamwork with colleagues?

**How can employees foster high-quality connections in an international environment?
– 25 min**

High-quality connections are short-term, positive interactions, where it is important, how all persons involved feel and what is the beneficial outcome, of building and fostering these connections.

Fostering high-quality connections, when working hybrid with your colleagues is _____

Questions for all

- Why are high-quality connections with your colleagues important?
- How do you think that hybrid work influences these connections? And how are high-quality connections influenced in an international environment (company)?
- What do you do to foster, encourage high-quality connections with your coworkers? Can you please also name some practical examples?

Question for leaders

- What are some tactics, strategies you use, to encourage strong connections with your employees and within your team?

Question for non-leaders

- Who do you think, plays an important role, when it comes to encouraging high-quality connections at workplace?

What are the differences in perceptions of fostering connections in a hybrid model between leaders and non-leaders? – 45 min

Fostering high-quality connections positively effects _____

Questions for all

- Are there some strategies, practical examples in your company, where leaders and non-leaders foster high-quality connection? What is Human Resources department doing?

Questions for leaders

- How do you think that the perception of fostering high-quality connections, in a hybrid working environment differs from that of non-leaders?
- What kind of assistance or experience, in your opinion, are necessary for leaders to effectively nurture relationships in a hybrid model?

Questions for non-leaders

- In contrast to your personal point of view, how can leaders help fostering and encouraging high-quality connections in a hybrid work?
- What can employees do on daily basis, to encourage building strong relationships among colleagues and with their managers?