



# **Impact of Covid-19 pandemic on company management in Finland**

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## **ABSTRACT**

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The study analyses the pros and cons in executive management strategies of Finnish companies during the COVID-19 pandemic. Most companies choose "Work From Home" mode as an integral business model, which may possess long-term strategic impact. Therefore, how Finnish companies face this adversity that the pandemic has brought, and what strategies they have and will apply are to be discussed in this research.

This study focuses on senior level executive management teams and human resource roles in Finnish companies. It emphasizes how the executive management teams and human resource roles work with the employees to face adversities during the pandemic. The purpose of this study is to provide a time-limited guidance for executive teams to deal with the post-pandemic leadership styles of management. This study also emphasizes how HR managers and executive management teams rethink the situation and bring strategies into practices for employees in the work environment after the COVID-19 pandemic.

The theoretical part of this study is the background explaining employees' working life of Finnish companies during the COVID-19 pandemic. The theoretical part is based on relevant studies on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in the workplace regarding management.

This study applies qualitative approaches, with data generated by conducting questionnaire interviews with open questions. Twenty-five senior employees, including a majority of senior managers or heads of companies, participated in the survey. The purpose of the questionnaires is to bring beneficial guidance and solutions on management-relevant strategies for Finnish companies during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

The results show the impacts of pandemic on all aspects of management, and how these impacts will persist during the post-pandemic era. Finnish companies or even non-commercial organizations may benefit from the findings in the thesis. The pandemic has had a tremendous influence on business globally. The thesis, through deep analysis of the influence on company management, delivers beneficial guidance regarding the potentially beneficial adjustment.

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## **ABBREVIATIONS AND TERMS**

WHF = Work from home

WHO = World Health Organization

HR = Human Resource

COVID-19 = Coronavirus disease

EPA = Emergency Powers Act

STT = Suomen Tietotoimisto (In English translation is Finnish News Agency)

YLE = Yleisradio Oy (In English translation is Finnish Broadcasting Company)

THL= Terveyden ja hyvinvoinnin laitos (In English translation is Finnish Institute  
for Health and Welfare)

EU= European Union

## 1 INTRODUCTION

In March 2022, the situational report by World Health Organization (WHO) highlighted the grim reality of over 433 million cases of infection, and over 5.9 million deaths globally from COVID-19 (Organization, 2022). COVID-19 has brought tremendous changes to the global order (Kaushik & Guleria, 2020). It has changed not only the way we live and stay, but also the environment we work and study (Wong, Lau, & Chan, 2021). The economic and social influence of COVID-19 has been far-reaching for all those aspects. In this international and inter-connected world, most companies across different countries have been influenced and even devastated by the pandemic (Kaushik & Guleria, 2020). When the COVID-19 outbreak began to spread across countries, thousands of people started to face serious health problems, and the death rate rose continuously (Kaushik & Guleria, 2020). The best solution to stop the speed of spreading of the COVID-19 Pandemic is to minimize all possible economic and social activities. Many countries impose even complete lockdowns, and people are required to stay at home and accept social distance to reduce infection (Donthu & Gustafsson, 2020).

In Finland, on the 16th of March 2020, the government declared a state of emergency because of the COVID-19 outbreak. Subsequently, the government executed several physical distancing measures to protect risk groups, and to slow the spread of virus. To some extent, Finland has managed to contain the epidemic. In comparison with many other countries, the outbreak landed late in Finland (Tiirinki et al., 2020). However, the country's lockdown influenced many sectors which include hospitality, hotel, airlines, and manufacturing industries, and it did cause enormous disruption in economic development (Kaushik & Guleria, 2020). Accordingly, companies use "Work From Home" concept to get over the current urgent situation, and to deal with economic turbulence caused by COVID-19 taking advantage of modern IT technology (Kaushik & Guleria, 2020). In this thesis, I analyse how the executive management teams and human resource roles in Finnish organizations work with the employees in the work environment to face this adversity during the COVID-19 pandemic, and what strategies they apply in both short and long terms.

## **2 OBJECTIVES**

### **2.1 The impact of COVID-19 pandemic on management as a research topic**

COVID-19 has caused tremendous human suffering, challenged the foundations of societal well-being, and changed our life. In addition to the immediate influence on job markets and incomes, the COVID-19 pandemic has also increased people's concerns and anxiety levels ("COVID-19: Protecting people and societies," 31.03.2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has led to the deepest economic recession that brings a financial crisis (Belas, Gavurova, Dvorsky, Cepel, & Durana, 2022), while most companies use the WFH concept to counteract this challenge (Kaushik & Guleria, 2020). Therefore, employees are allowed to work remotely to handle possible business problems.

In this thesis, I will study how the COVID-19 pandemic affects the management in general in commercial companies in Finland. I choose this topic as a research phenomenon because the COVID-19 has huge influence for many organizations in both short and long-term run. Especially, the study focuses on how an organisation's HR managers and executive management teams work for this adversity. The thesis, through data analysis regarding the consequently transformed management adjustment and strategies due to the pandemic, delivers beneficial guidance for companies considering possible post-pandemic struggles regarding management.

### **2.2 Research gap**

Despite many studies focusing on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, however, studies focusing on management of Finnish organisations are scarce. Although the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has been well recognized by academicians, existing empirical pieces of evidence that address the process of management in Finnish companies are still missing.

Some researchers have studied the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in the workplace or on small business outcomes and expectations (Kaushik & Guleria,

2020). However, how the covid-pandemic affects the management of companies has not been systematically investigated. In this thesis, I emphasize how the pandemic affects management strategies of companies in Finland.

### **2.3 Research purpose and questions**

The aim of this study is to provide a time-limited guidance for executive management teams and HR roles to deal with the post-pandemic styles of management. All Finnish companies or non-commercial organizations may benefit from findings of the thesis. The pandemic has huge influence for many organizations. The thesis, through deep analysis of the influence, delivers beneficial guidance regarding potential strategic adjustment in the post-pandemic era.

To better understand how the executive management teams and human resource roles manage their employees to face the COVID-19 pandemic, there are some specific questions regarding the following concerns:

1. What are HR resources roles and executive management teams' perceptions of the impact of COVID-19?
2. What influence has the pandemic brought to companies' HR management policy?
3. What policies companies take to foster employees' performance levels along with the WFH mode?
4. How are companies prepared for long-term impact of the pandemic?

This study applies the qualitative methodology, with data generated by conducting questionnaire interviews on senior HR roles and executive management teams working in the Finnish companies. The purpose of the interviews is to bring a better understanding on how the executive management teams and human resource roles work with the employees in the work environment to face this challenge during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study focuses only on Finnish companies.

To provide background for this study, the author first reviews the literature regarding the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the workplace, especially

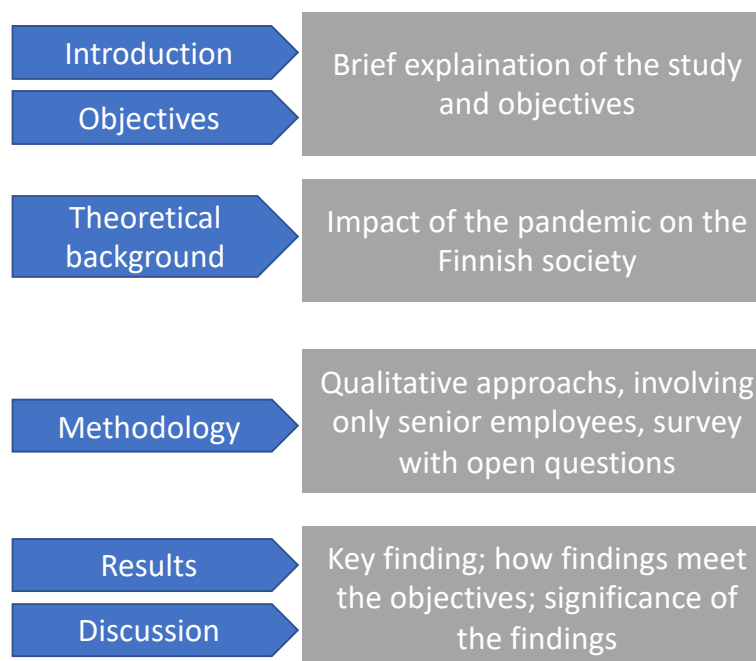


around the concept of “Working From Home”. This helps to understand the strategy of COVID-19 in business and research in general.

Then, the author applies the qualitative method that explores the deeper framework underlying employee’ practical needs toward the pandemic. Qualitative methodology is suitable to understand the reality interpreted and constructed culturally, socially and situationally (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984). The aim of this study method is to comprehend complicated phenomena in a systematic way, instead of to establish direct relationships between single variables (Eriksson, 2016). Constructs of how COVID-19 pandemic affects management are argued based on the interview results, and also based on previous literature on how COVID-19 pandemic affects management in the workplace.

## 2.4 Thesis structure

The thesis includes six parts: a brief introduction of the thesis, objectives regarding why the study is conducted, a theoretical review regarding the impact of the pandemic on Finnish society, methods used in the study, result with key findings and a discussion around the findings.



**Figure 1.** Thesis structure.

In my thesis, the theoretical framework of this study follows the COVID-19 pandemic timeline in Finland. As this study focuses on company management in Finland. It is essential to provide brief information about the current COVID-19 situation in Finland. Further, the author presents the pros and cons of WFH concept of Finnish companies, since many companies adopt this mode during the pandemic. The last part of this chapter discussed the trend of future of work styles.

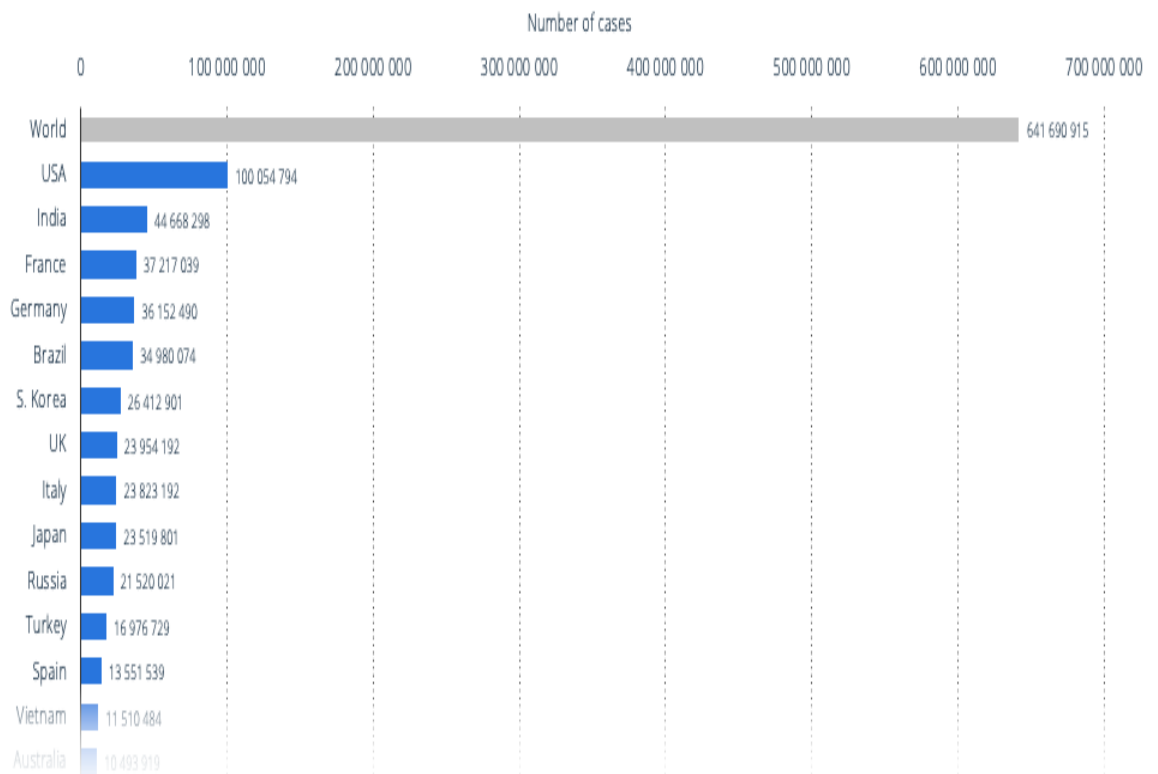
Qualitative approach has been used in the study method, which was justified in the method section as an ideal for the planned study, as previously (Li, 2018). After the interview, data are thoroughly analysed according to the objectives and key research questions. Finally, the findings are discussed regarding practical meanings, research quality and limitations.

### 3 BACKGROUND

#### 3.1 COVID-19 pandemic timeline in Finland

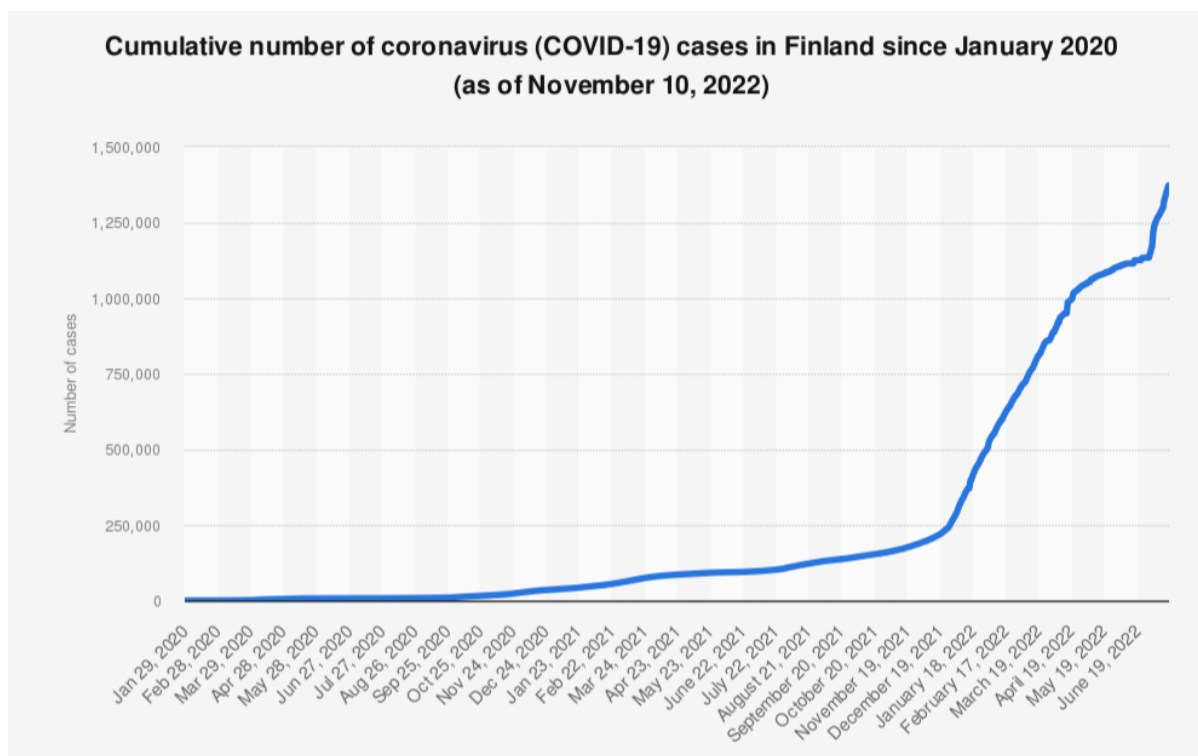
The COVID-19 pandemic started in the end of 2019. After that, the virus has spread quickly in spite of attempts to contain it (Truong Nguyen et al., 2022). According to Statista (by the 17 November 2022), COVID-19 outbreak has spread almost to every country, and it has infected 642 million population worldwide, with 6.6 million population died after contracting respiratory virus. The worst-affected countries include India, Brazil and the United States (Elflein, 2022).

Number of coronavirus (COVID-19) cases worldwide as of November 17, 2022, by country or territory  
 COVID-19 cases worldwide as of November 17, 2022, by country or territory



**Figure 2.** Global number of COVID-19 cases by 17 November 2022 (Elflein, 2022).

COVID-19 was first time found in Ivalo in Finland in January 2020, after which it spread quickly during the spring (Truong Nguyen et al., 2022). The first death caused by COVID-19 in Finland was reported on the 20<sup>th</sup> of March 2020 (Clausnitzer, 27.10. 2022). From that time, the number of COVID-19 infections increased rapidly. It peaked on April 6 with 210 reported cases per day. The curve of infections, however, had been flattened after mid-April 2020 (Moisio, 2020). By June 8, 2020, more than 7,000 people had tested positive for the COVID-19 virus, and 323 died (59 deaths per million) (Moisio, 2020). On March 16, 2020, the Finnish government, in cooperation with the President of the Republic, announced and declared a state of emergency over the COVID-19 outbreak under the Emergency Powers Act (Neuvonen, 2020). The measures were aiming to protect the populace and ensure the functioning of the economy and society ("The state of emergency in Finland over coronavirus outbreak ", 2020). Protection and restriction measures were adopted under the Communicable Disease Act and the EPA introduced some extensive policy interventions, which included temporary closure of restaurants, educational institutions, quarantine orders, recreational venues, additional border controls (Neuvonen, 2020), limited to ten people for the public meeting (Palagina, 2020), travel restrictions and basic suggestion for populace to work at home if necessary (Neuvonen, 2020). On the 28th of March, the parliament voted for Uusimaa borders close due to the 1025 confirmed coronavirus cases. The shutdown of the place is an expectation to help slow down the epidemic ("Uusimaa closes borders after late-night vote in parliament," 2020). By this time many companies run offices jobs through the WFH concept to get over the situation (Kaushik & Guleria, 2020), especially the IT departments in Finnish companies are encouraged to move to remote work as much as possible (Palagina, 2020).



**Figure 3.** Cumulative number of COVID-19 cases in Finland during 2020 (THL, 2022).

In April 2020, some restrictions on travel in and out were ended by the government, and specifically the Uusimaa regional borders were reopened ("Uusimaa regional border reopens,"). Later the same month, Prime Minister Sanna Marlin announced that Finnish schools reopen on 14 May 2020. Distance learning is not suggested once schools open again, and students will not be allowed to stay in their own homes to finish the academic year if they do not have special permission. Schools will open in phases in a controlled manner and keep classrooms separated from each other and possibly in shifts, based on guidance from health officials ("Govt: Finnish schools to reopen from 14 May,"). Beyond that, work-related travel is allowed within the EU, while leisure travel is still not advised (Palagina, 2020).

During the summer, the restriction on gatherings changed, which limited the number of people at public events to 50 ("Guidelines on prevention of coronavirus infections must be followed at public events,"). Most of the companies continued to adopt WFH mode, although public policy had altered. In July 2020, the re-

restrictions on gatherings changed dramatically, which permitted 500 people gatherings in public, but with safety distancing measures and some additional conditions. For travelling, the government still suggests people to avoid unnecessary travel abroad, except for Iceland, Denmark, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway and Estonia, where international border controls have been lifted ("500+ public gatherings now permitted, but with conditions," 2020).

In August, the Finnish government announced that people would be suggested to use masks in enclosed spaces where social distancing is not possible, including for example taking public transport, to slow down the spread of COVID-19 in Finland. However, the advice does not apply to children under 15 or people who cannot wear masks due to health issues ("Government backs mask recommendation, telecommuting on a regional basis," 2020).

In fall, the situation began to deteriorate because the second wave of COVID-19, as many experts predicted. Although Finland's infection rate is much lower than most other EU countries, some precautionary measures have been stepped up in order to slow the spread of epidemic (Palagina, 2020). On 1<sup>st</sup> October, the number of coronavirus cases exceeded 10,000 based on data provided by THL. On 30 October, 344 detected cases in total were reported ("COVID-19 pandemic in Finland," 2020). At the end of the year, the first COVID-19 vaccine was registered and administered (Palagina, 2020).

To sum up, Finland had managed to well control the pandemic. Compared to many countries, the COVID-19 outbreak arrived relatively late in Finland. It enabled the early implementation of restrictive regulations and recommendations (Tiirinki et al., 2020).

### **3.2 Work from home concept of Finnish companies**

The COVID-19 pandemic rapidly changed "where and how" the individuals worked (Bhatia & Mote, 2021). Numerous organizations had been shut down and started to encourage employees to work remotely to keep social distance (Bhatia & Mote, 2021). To some extent, the pandemic has accelerated the adoption of online learning and remote work mode. Earlier, WFH mode has been only an

acceptable practice in technology and IT sectors (Kaushik & Guleria, 2020). Now, in contrast, many industry sectors also start to adopt WFH mode. Companies have realized the important benefits if applying WFH mode. The WFH mode helps some companies and industries stay afloat in limited ways (Kaushik & Guleria, 2020). A WFH mode, defined as a workday spent in a home environment, is a remote work arrangement where employees work at their homes without traveling to a central workplace (Wong et al., 2021). The need for social distancing has given rise to the concept of WFH for companies to keep employees in the work spirit. Working from home is where employees can manage their jobs from home through the adoption of digital platforms (Kaushik & Guleria, 2020).

### **3.2.1 Pros and Cons for WFH (work from home)**

When the COVID-19 outbreak started, most Finnish companies adopted the WFH mode, which allowed many full-time employees to work remotely. To some extent, COVID-19 pandemic has been an evident advantage for alternative work environment and the way how people work (Bhatia & Mote, 2021). At the present, the views around WFH are turning into a positive direction. There are some positive views on this mode as discussed below:

1. The work time is saved on commuting to and from the workplace. It is beneficial for employees to work from home if they live far from the company because commuting takes time, especially during the rush hour gridlock. In comparison, when people work from home, they do not need to travel, and they can save travelling time for the productive results of work (Madell, 2022). People can also keep themselves safer beside saving time since COVID-19 spreads quickly. The most important thing is to stay safe during the lockdown period.
2. For families, it is often necessary that parents work from home while taking care of kids, since most schools and daycares are closed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Parents can arrange own working timetables since working hours are flexible (Kaushik & Guleria, 2020).

3. The most significant and essential stereotype of the WFH concept is that people can save money on their work wardrobe. People can wear comfortable clothes such as pajamas during working hours rather than business casual clothing for daily work. To some extent, people can spend less and reduce or eliminate expensive dry-cleaning budgets (Lowe-MacAuley, 03.11. 2022).
4. When people work from home, they get the flexibility to arrange their daily work. It is easy for people with children who need to work and take responsibility for the family. More important, there is no rush for parents to pick up sick kids from school while working in the office, or to attend a routine business meeting on-site. They get more flexibility to work in their way and meet their deadlines of committed tasks (Lowe-MacAuley, 03.11. 2022).
5. When people work remotely, for those who do not have kids and family, it is easier for them to keep focusing on their work without any disturbance by dropping by office colleagues to chat with on non-work related topics (Madell, 2022).
6. From the macroeconomic point of view, the fewer people commuting, the fewer fossil fuels we use, and the lower pollution we will have. This means that it is essentially beneficial for sustainable development. According to research, after only a few short weeks of the COVID-19 crisis, pollution levels in parts of European countries had been falling significantly (Kaushik & Guleria, 2020).

However, working from home comes with cons as discussed below:

1. There will be a lot of interruptions from family members when people work from home, considering also that daycares and schools are closed during the COVID-19 crisis (Kaushik & Guleria, 2020)
2. There are many possible distractions when people work from homes, such as neighbors' noise, kids watching television, pet barking or others that



may influence how people concentrating on their work. It can reduce motivation and work productivity if people are constantly distracted by those things (Herrity, 2022).

3. WFH creates a totally different work culture than situations when employees work in the office (Kaushik & Guleria, 2020).
4. Sometimes, telecommuting can lead to a disconnect or poor video-quality conferencing between employees, due to internet signal unstable connections. WFH may also face technical issues since people work remotely, and there are no technical coworkers to communicate with if there are some technical issues with computers. Those things sometimes happen especially for new employees who just started a new job but have to accept WFH mode (Herrity, 2022).
5. WFH requires self-motivated commitment and dedication, and being agile and proactive on behalf of co-workers. To some extent, HR managers play a significant role, they should show employees how people should connect with each other and what kind of rules they need to follow when they work remotely (Kaushik & Guleria, 2020).
6. Workplaces disconnect and working at home comes with less face time with coworkers. Working from home brings people to the result that they do not have the same chance to communicate face-to-face with their colleagues. Thus, WFH reduces the company's team cohesiveness and employee–organization relationships (Herrity, 2022).
7. Working from home, people may feel stressed if they face work-related problems or urgent issues. In contrast, this usually does not happen in the office because colleagues can often provide help (Sauciukenaite, 2016)
8. Some research findings show that employees staying remote tend work longer hours at home. They may also spend too much time in online conferences and meetings, since they have to track more communication channels than usual. According to research, 45% employees say that they

typically work longer hours per week than before. Data also indicates that employees having children are more likely to work during the weekends compared to employees without children (Flashman, 2012).

9. Many employees struggle with eating habits when they work from home ("Eating right while working from home ", 2021). Overeating may happen due to stressful situations. Unbalanced eating is severe for workers who are overloaded (Sauciukenaite, 2016). The reason why people turn to eating food is to encounter stressing work environment. The whole body tends to crave for high-sugar and high-calorie food during stressful situations since this food can offer short-term bursts of energy. Stress causes increase cortisol levels which may easily elevate appetite. When people eat more sweet food, they may feel happier as sugar induces secretion of dopamine (Ro, 2020). As a psychologist of Las Vegas-based clinical Cortney Warren quotes, "disinhibited eating can activate the pleasure center of people's brain but also can psychologically remove them from the negative emotion that you're feeling at the time".

### **3.2.2 The future of work (Hybrid workplace)**

The COVID-19 pandemic has taught the world a lesson in strategic planning and preparation for the future. The arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic also accelerated a rethinking of the physical space in which people work. With the disruption to the normal flow of life, cancellation of meetings and closing of schools, and restrictions for many other social events are also lifted. Organizations have had their fairly shared responsibility as they must comply with new social distancing policies. Stakeholders must restructure the systems of work they are already doing (Iqbal, Khalid, & Barykin, 2021). Unavoidably, the concept of virtual arrangements and remote work mode were embraced by each other (Newman & Ford, 2021). Therefore, the flexibility and adaptability of the workplace has been taken into consideration by many companies.

The COVID-19 pandemic brings a trend for increased demand for hybrid workplaces (Iqbal et al., 2021). The concept of hybrid workplace is on the lips of all industrial trends globally. Since digitization gradually becomes more normalized

around the world, every workplace in the companies requires to maximise and transcend barriers and innovations for easy entry into the model of a hybrid work (Iqbal et al., 2021).

In Finland, some workplaces of companies have continued the work remotely or applied a hybrid work model to their work workplace after the moment when government ended WFH recommendation. According to YLE, Finnish national news channel, the Finnish government plans to end the nationwide WFH concept recommendation by March 2022. However, Finnish companies are not expecting people to return to work in the office, since two years of telecommuting has resulted in a cultural change ("Finland ends nationwide remote working recommendation," 2022). Most companies still allow employees to work remotely because the advanced telecommunications connections bring and provide a lot of flexibility to the employees, and some employees have moved and lived far from their workplaces ("Finland ends nationwide remote working recommendation," 2022). If some companies maintain the amount of monetary gain with slightest effect on staff wellbeing and productivity level, they will not continue the traditional working ways in the post-pandemic stage (Bhatia & Mote, 2021). Instead, Finnish companies adopt the hybrid work model. To some extent, Finnish companies embrace the actuality that their employees both relish and look forward to the flexibility to work remotely (Brastad, 2022).

Therefore, the future work modes are hybrid. Conceptually, hybrid workplaces involve three elements: (1) the digital workplace including the underlying technology; (2) the physical workplace which defines the place or location of work as both in-office on-site and work remotely; and (3) the human workplace that describe and explains the cultural, processes and methods aspects ("Future of Work-Services and Solutions 2022," 2022).



**Figure 4.** The hybrid future of work ("Future of Work-Services and Solutions 2022," 2022).

A hybrid work system ensures that organizations that adopt it enjoy the special advantages that come with telework systems (Trede, Markauskaite, McEwen, & Macfarlane, 2019). In the remote working package, the essential elements involve reduced labor costs, working flexibility, and higher employee satisfaction and a better environmental experience (Iqbal et al., 2021).

It is essential to find the best way for balance between human, digital and physical workplaces. As managers, an important thing is to trust people (Brastad, 2022). Since the digital world is artificial, employers are required to provide more support and to foster a trust culture for effective collaborations in this hybrid workplace. Further, employers need to support the employees' need. Some people need coaching and user adoption training in this digital transformation, since the "digital world" is very new for "digital natives". Thus, employers need to provide employees the suitable choice of tools, devices and applications (Brastad, 2022). Finally, digital workplace services have shifted from focusing on technology and simple

end-user computing to being a central part of a company's operation. Technology services are integrated with transformation initiatives, with a greater emphasis on outcomes and value. Thus, employers must analyze and measure facts on the employees' requirements, experiences, retention and productivity. Combining data and sentiment survey, the company itself has to get powerful methods and tools to drive and foster improvements in this digital transformation (Brastad, 2022).

## **4 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **4.1 Research Philosophy**

Research often starts from making philosophical assumptions (Saunders, 2009). These essential assumptions indicate the way the researcher views or perceives the world, as previously discussed (Li, 2018). They influence how I understand the data, what I study and how I learn from it (Eriksson, 2016). Epistemology, methodology and ontology can be considered as the most important concepts of philosophy in social sciences (Hunt, 2009). Research philosophy shows a special way of observing the world, and it has a substantial influence on how qualified ways establish effective claims to knowledge, all of which affects the methodology applied in social research (Guba, 1994). Many researchers believe that ontological, methodological and epistemological premises are interconnected, in an interpretive structure along with certain beliefs to instruct the implementation of the study. These perspectives can be defined as a paradigm which defines what falls outside and inside the limits of legitimate inquiry (Gummesson, 2005). As Gummesson suggested, all researches should be built on a foundation of a concrete paradigm and pre-understanding of the researcher (Baker, 2010).

#### **4.1.1 Research strategy**

A research strategy of inquiry refers to a bundle of skills, assumptions, and practices that researchers employ as they move to the empirical world (Normand K. and Lincoln Yvonna S. Denzin, 1994). Simply, it practices the paradigms of understanding. Meanwhile, the strategies of inquiry allow researchers to use particular methods to gather and analyze empirical materials together, such as a case study which needs interviewing, document analyzing and observing (Li, 2018). To put it differently, research strategies comply and anchor paradigms in empirical sites or in particular methodological applications. Thus, no methods are mechanically added as an entity in a research project. Instead, they are combined with the theoretical groundwork of methodologies and they should be intimately

connected with the data needed, the research question and the theoretical frame that applied in the research project (Taylor, Bogdan, & DeVault, 2015).

#### **4.1.2 Qualitative methodology**

The current thesis used qualitative method which is proper to find answers for strategic management related research questions. The choice of the type of method is also related to what I expect, how I define the question and how to develop an approach to answer the question. No method, quantitative or qualitative, is by itself superior to the other one. This method works efficiently for a particular task that cannot be decided in advance. This pragmatic argument essentially means that the nature of the phenomenon of research should determine the most suitable method of inquiry (Silverman, 2013). A methodology is the way in which I handle questions and find answers. It addresses how research is conducted in the social sciences. The qualitative methodology refers to how to select descriptive data, interviewees' words, and records of interviewees' behaviour. It is also on how to study social life phenomenologically (Norman K. and Lincoln Yvonna S. Denzin, 2003).

This paper uses the qualitative research method. The qualitative research is important to understand how reality is interpreted and constructed (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984). As Ray Rist pointed out in 1977, "qualitative methodology, like quantitative methodology, is more than a set of data-gathering techniques. It is a way of approaching the empirical world." (Bodgan, 2015). The aim of qualitative methodology is to comprehend complicated phenomena in a systematic way instead of establishing direct relationships between single variables (Eriksson, 2016). The data collection and analysis in qualitative methods are sensitive to the phenomena with cultural and social context and to make an understanding of these themes of studies (Normand K. and Lincoln Yvonna S. Denzin, 1994).

The objective of this research is to analyse how executive management teams and HR roles work together in adversity and what kind of solutions they use in the work environment during COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, I chose to use qualitative methodology. While quantitative studies allow to understand the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the management in terms of quantity, intensity,

and frequency, qualitative approaches emphasize on processes and meanings (Moisander, 2006). This research is not to focus on the intensity or frequency of the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the management. I need to analyse the quality and structures of the data, such as regarding how the COVID-19 pandemic affects employees of companies' work and how they solve this problem.

Qualitative research approaches are characterized with simultaneous data collection/generation, analysis and interpretation processes (Eriksson, 2016). Data in social environment usually do not appear as a collection of signal objects. Analyzable data is often generated by the researcher. Analysis of the data can be based on either inductive, deductive or abductive reasoning (Eriksson, 2016). While inductive analysis is to draw general conclusion from observed phenomenon, deductive method is to understand the phenomenon based on hypothesis and theories. Abduction approaches, as used in the current study, is to transfer the observed phenomenon, i.e., the collective data, into categories and concepts which answer our specific concerns (Yin, 2003).

## **4.2 Data generation**

In this thesis, the data was created from only one source, i.e., data through the conducted questionnaire interviews. There are two qualifications that should be considered to solve particular research problem when choosing participants for a qualitative study. One is the accessibility, and the other one is the suitability of the participants (Malhotra, 2007). Structured survey with open questions is a qualitative method of investigation that associates a pre-determined set of open-ended questions, and with the chance for the interviewer to find specific answers.

The study involves only senior level employees with deep knowledge of the corresponding company policy, particularly associative to the pandemic. Managers or senior specialists who have gone through the pandemic with their current employer are the most targeted potential participants. In this thesis, participants are convenient samples recruited from the author's own networks.

Twenty-five participants were involved in the current study. All subjects provide their oral permission for using the collected data and are anonymously addressed in the thesis. No ethical approval is required for the current study. All subjects



within the author's social networks who are current residents may be from Tampere, Helsinki, and Turku.

### **4.3 Data analysis**

In research using qualitative approaches, data analysis, generation and their interpretation are often taking place at the same time. The purpose of qualitative data analysis is to make conclusion from the data to in a general sense without sacrificing significant information (Eskola, 1998). In the approach, the analysis of the data has already started during the interview. The author starts to analyze the obtained data by hunting for connections and observations about frequently emerging and consensus constructs and phenomena (Shukla, 2012).

As soon as all questionnaire interviews were completed, in the current study, the author went through all the responses to identify main factors and constructs.

## 5 RESULTS

### 5.1 Information of the participants

Twenty-five senior level company employees (Table 1) participated in the survey, including four team leads and 11 senior managers (e.g., marketing, sales managers) with potential HR management roles, and 10 project managers (including senior engineers, analysts). Among the participants, twenty interviewees have worked in their current employer companies since the beginning of the pandemic. Therefore, the data eligibly reflect the high-level management-related strategies of the involved companies associative to impact of the pandemic.

**Table 1.** Company roles of the participants.

	Positions	Category
1	Talent Acquisition consultant	Project manager
2	R&D team manager	Team lead
3	Strategic operation manager	Senior manager
4	Territory manager, Finland	Senior manager
5	senior compliance officer	Senior manager
6	During the pandemic, Intendant	Senior manager
7	Scrum Master	Project manager
8	Project manager	Project manager
9	Sales Engineer	Project manager
10	Audit manager	Project manager
11	Business Analyst	Project manager
12	Marketing manager	Senior manager
13	Team lead	Team lead
14	IT service manager, IT project manager	Senior manager
15	Account Director	Senior manager
16	Sales Manager	Senior manager
17	Community Sourcing Manager	Senior manager
18	Recruitment Manager	Senior manager

19	Team manager	Team lead
20	People Leader	Team lead
21	Senior IT Specialist	Project manager
22	Project manager	Project manager
23	Program Manager	Senior manager
24	Sourcing Director	Senior manager
25	Export Manager	Senior manager

The involved companies are with a majority of 15 IT companies (or IT department of a company), two medical companies, one food company, one forest industry, one bank, one ship industry, one first production industry, and three consulting companies.

## 5.2 Impact of the pandemic on recruitment

Results show that the covid-19 pandemic has substantial impact on recruitment strategies of Finnish companies. Around 50% of the participants of the study emphasized an increased flexibility and tendency of recruiting remote workers. All IT field managers stated that their companies have and will continue to have fully remote employees. Recruitment is not any more limited by geography, with managers indicating that the pandemic has reshaped the people's "mindset".

*"It gives our company more options when we are choosing applicants from all around Finland instead of focusing the areas around our offices."*

- Account director, IT company

Finland had been already advanced in digitalization which facilitates remote work mode before the pandemic as indicated by involved managers, while the pandemic seems to further encourage this trend. Along with the remote work mode, online interviews have been also increasingly accepted and this will be more and more often in the future according to the interviewed managers. However, pros

and cons of online interviews have been reported. When asked “whether challenges exist when selecting potential employees online”, most participants answered “no”.

*“No major challenges, at least not with the Nordic working culture/environment.”*

- *IT service manager, Manufacturing factory.*

Although most interviewees did not state challenges of online interviews, some pointed out challenges due to its online nature and a restricted full picturisation of the potential employees.

*“Being a culture fit is really important to us, and it is always harder to get a full picture of the person online.”*

- *Team lead, IT company*

The resources for recruitment of new employees are also substantially influenced by the pandemic. While Finnish companies are less limited to employ remote workers, the other side of the same coin is that more talent Finnish jobseekers start to search for job positions abroad. Job opportunities also easily flow to cheaper countries.

*“Depending on the perspective, the pandemic has removed many blockers for remote work, for a country like Finland, it also causes the job opportunities to move to other cheaper European countries.”*

- *Sourcing manager, IT service company*

Taken together, the pandemic has shaped the mindsets of both employers and jobseekers bringing joint effect on the future recruitment strategy. In general, Finnish companies are more open to hire remote workers whenever it is possible. The impact of the pandemic on recruitment strategy seems to be substantial, and apparently this influence will introduce a long-term strategical influence on Finnish companies. In a short term, it is unclear whether or how soon will it return to the previous pre-pandemic norm.

### 5.3 Impact of the pandemic on office space

Challenges exist regarding how office spaces are managed during the pandemic as the WFH mode has been increasingly used. This WFH mode may change to a new routine in some companies.

*“Remote work has become our default policy.”*

- *Community Sourcing Manager, IT service company*

In most cases, as the results show, restrictions for the fully remote mode have been re-introduced to a certain extent after the pandemic. For example, companies may provide two types of contracts according to the job roles, regulating the corresponding work mode (e.g., full remote, or partly remote). It seems that several companies adapt this hybrid mode with two to three days required to work in office. Half of my interviewed managers require their team members to work at least two days in office each week. Some companies even set this as criteria that decides whether they can hold their physical office space or not.

*“Employees who work more than 3 days at the office can keep their own work desk. Otherwise, they should use commune desks.”*

- *Sale Engineer, Consulting company.*

Though, after the pandemic, more employees are returning to the office, it has not been as busy as before, and many companies had adapted to use flexible seats with open space style. This may have substantially saved the cost of maintaining large offices.

*“We are moving to the no fixed seat & desk office.”*

- *Strategic operation manager, Medical systems*

Office space issue is not only a financial concern, but it is also tightly linked with the recruitment strategy of the company. Mindset change of jobseekers may even push employers to select remote talent workers. This on the other hand saves

financial cost of maintaining office space. Several companies compensate remote workers by provide small fund for construction of home offices.

*“You can change your contract to be a fully remote contract and get 1000 euros for purchasing remote work equipment such as monitors, tables etc.”*

- *Project manager, IT company*

Regarding potential long-term effect, most interviewees stated that the pandemic will affect the office layout during the next three to five years. Half of the responses have stated changes regarding the application of flexible seats and desks. Therefore, while employees start to be encouraged to work in office, the partially remote routine will probably continue in most companies. This will introduce a persistent impact on office space management.

*“I believe we won’t go back to pure office life anymore, hybrid will be our future. Teams will also be more scattered as working on site won’t be anymore required”.*

- *Recruitment manager, AI company*

#### **5.4 Impact of the pandemic on employee performance**

Companies all have the key aim of being profitable, and the high-performance levels of employees are crucial. During the pandemic and current post-pandemic era, many companies have been thriving to maintain their company culture. As employees are working remotely, it is often difficult to keep them closely linked so as to build an atmosphere of interconnection. This is not only important for teamwork, but also for commitment of employed workers.

During the pandemic, WFH mode has been used in all companies if possible. Online mode does not always mean flexibility, and some companies simply introduced certain restrictions for employees’ online status.

*“We need to be online between 10-16. We can work from abroad for some weeks per year”*

- *Recruitment manager, AI company*

While other companies may have no similar restrictions, workload needs to be proper. Also, wellbeing of the remote workers needs to be more carefully monitored. Some managers highlighted the importance of the effective communications regarding potential work-related health risk factors.

*“Good and transparent communication, weekly and bi-weekly meeting with leader, weekly meeting and chat with team.”*

- Talent Acquisition consultant, Software development company

*“Many team leads have increased the amount of 1-1 discussions with team members, to stay on top of their well-being.”*

-Team Lead, IT company.

Companies have used several approaches to maintain the motivation of remote employees, such as providing lunch perks, emergent childcare, training budget, etc. The social welfare service in Finland has been extremely good, and space for Finnish companies to improve these aspects is small. Online coffee breaks, and celebrations including the pre-Christmas parties have been reported by many managers to keep the companies' culture.

*“During Covid there were virtual coffee meetings, and more Team meetings when we had cameras open.”*

- Business Analyst, Financial service company.

As the pandemic is fading, companies start to be active in organising offline events where employees are free to join.

Despite of the potential challenge to maintain a company culture, no interviewed managers emphasized lowered work efficiency of employees. Some of the managers even reported beneficial outcomes since communication time for each day is saved and online meetings are convenient.

*“IT team performance remains the same or even more efficient in a way, out of the full digitalisation, which was forced by COVID”*

- IT service manager, Manufacturing industry

Most of the interviewees reported unnoticeable differences regarding employees' performance efficacy. This "benefit" for employees' outcomes may partly root in the companies' effort in creating easy communication channels and enhanced digitalization, along with flexibility for work.

*"Leverage online collaboration tools like Miro, Slack, Jira and Figma. Arrange working processes in the way that work could be done asynchronously. For example, better documentation so that your colleagues can do their work independently or using company chat tool for daily check-ins instead of meetings."*

- Account director, IT company

Increased flexibility of time schedule and comparably good outcomes of work performance are the pros of the pandemic on Finnish companies. In contrary, cons of the online mode of work are also obvious. For example, the life and work boundaries of employees become blur.

*"We went entirely remote. Life/work balance became very blurry."*

- Recruitment manager, AI company

Also, face-to-face interaction is very important for some employees. Apparently, this online mode is not suitable for all.

*"Big con is that it is harder to really work as a team without physical meetings."*

- Territory manager, Health Technology

Also, some managers complain that the communication cost is higher, and they have to join more meetings than usual.

*"The managers have more meetings to attend, communication cost is higher than onsite."*

- Recruitment manager, IT service company

These drawbacks seem to become a driving force for the re-introduced restrictions on the remote mode. Despite of the flexibility and high efficacy with the



current work mode as adapted during the pandemic, to maintain a company's culture and to keep employees more committed may call for a change during the post-pandemic era.

## 5.5 General impacts

When managers were asked to evaluate the general impact, surprisingly, around half of the managers reported positive impacts of the pandemic.

*"I would say for the employee, it's a positive impact, because they got more flexibility than before. A better way of working."*

- Talent Acquisition consultant, Software Company

*"Positive, forced employers to be more flexible."*

- Scrum Master, IT company

*"The pandemic has accelerated businesses digital transformation, which is a positive impact from our company's standpoint."*

- Account director, IT company

This might be due to the fact that the involved companies are with a majority of the IT field. The pandemic has promoted digitalization which benefited the IT industry. Despite of the reported positive impacts, however, no managers have reported increased profit during the pandemic. Actually, several managers reported "hire freeze" at the beginning of the pandemic. Impact of the pandemic on companies' profit is not covered in the current thesis. Absolutely, if surviving through the pandemic, financial strategy may also need changes.

*"For long term we must further diversify our client portfolio to avoid situations where decline in one industry would have overwhelming negative impact on our company."*

- Account director, IT company

Regardless of whether the general impact is evaluated as positive or negative, the pandemic has tested Finnish companies regarding risk and strategic management.

*“The pandemic has proven how important it is for companies to have good and reliable online services available in addition to traditional ways of serving customers. This realization will help our company to continue providing high quality online services and help our clients to be successful in the digital world.”*

- Account director, IT company

*“We will take the learnings and develop from there.”*

- People lead, IT consulting company

## **6 DISCUSSION**

### **6.1 Summary of the research**

The current study focuses on the impact of the covid-19 pandemic on company management in Finland. Senior company employees, deeply involved in certain aspects of the corresponding company's management, were involved in a questionnaire survey. Questionnaire survey covers several management aspects including the recruitment policy, HR management, office space plan, financial strategy, and general policy around the remote work mode. Findings highlights the substantial impact of the pandemic on company strategic policies in both short and long terms in Finland.

Finnish companies had been well developed regarding digitalisations that facilitate remote work since long. The pandemic has further promoted this trend of remote work mode, with mindset changes influencing the Finnish market with a long-term effect. The recruitment policy has been substantially changed by the pandemic, since more and more jobseekers start to apply for jobs far from home. Also, Finnish companies start to move jobs to cheaper countries. Criteria that hinders recruiting remote workers have been lessened. Meanwhile, Finnish companies seem to have maintained a high-performance level of the employees during the pandemic. Company managers are also generally satisfied with their employee's outcomes. However, facts that lack of social interaction and challenge to maintain the company culture become key reasons to drive more employees to return to offices.

### **6.2 Practical implications of the research**

The finding has practical implications regarding company management in Finland. During the post-pandemic era, many companies may hesitate whether to keep the current work mode, i.e., an adapted remote work mode, or to quickly restore the office work mode. The findings of the current thesis remind company leaders to carefully evaluate the current situation of their company. They may need to know the current job market that influences company's recruitment strategy, as well as the wellbeing of their employees that may affect commitment of

employment relationships. Strategic changes and decisions need to be made according to specific situations of the companies.

While keeping the current WFH mode seems to be optimal for many Finnish companies, according to participants of my study. One key driving force that calls for change derives from the quality of life of the employees. Working home alone, employees may lose the usual rhythms of work and rest balance, and end up into overload of work. Some of my interviewed managers have expressed their overly engagement of online meetings. Compared to the WFH mode, work at office is often framed by the working hours which efficiently prevents overload.

### **6.3 Evaluating the research quality**

The current study involved senior company employees and used a systematically designed questionnaire survey to understand the temporary and long-term effect of the pandemic. A convenient sample was included, and most participants are connected with the author. All responses of the participants have been carefully evaluated. Therefore, study design and tools are the most ideal to answer the research questions.

### **6.4 Research limitation and further research directions**

The study bears limitation regarding methodology. Firstly, the study aims to involve only senior employees or managers. Therefore, it is hard to get a large number of committed participants. Considering their busy schedule, it is also challenging to arrange deep face-to-face interviews with all participants. Nevertheless, the open questionnaire survey has been found highly engaging for participants, as some interviewees report to spend an hour in answering all questions.

The involved companies are with a majority from the IT field, and data may be biased to interpolate to other fields, e.g. industries that violate remote work mode. Further, despite that senior employees are involved, not all of them have expertise in all studied aspects of management. Though answers provided, some of their responses were based on limited experiences or purely on observations. Questionnaires with open question surveys turned to be the most ideal approach.

However, this approach often fails to get comprehensive information regarding a company's future strategic policy. Finally, the questionnaires are largely around the "remote work mode" issues, and the research findings may therefore be also restricted to this theme.

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## APPENDICES

### Questions for the survey

The questionnaire aims to understand how Finnish business companies have been affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. Participation of the survey will be anonymous.

1. What type of organization are you working at (for example IT company)?
2. What is your position at the organization (for example, financial manager)?
3. How did or will COVID-19 pandemic affect your organization's recruitment policy?
4. Was there any challenge in selecting potential employees via online interviews?
5. Will you consider hiring fully remote workers in the future?
6. Is there any positive impact of the pandemic on your recruitment?
7. Had your company started using "Work from Home" mode when COVID-19 landed in Finland?
8. What has been your policy regarding remote work? What is your current policy?
9. Has your business gone remote? What benefits and/or deficits have you seen as a result?
10. If your office is remote, how have you maintained company culture?
11. How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected on the performance efficiency at your organization in general?
12. How to improve cross-functional collaboration during COVID-19 pandemic?
13. Have you resumed in-person work? How has COVID-19 affected your office processes or occupancy?
14. Do you see your office layout evolving in the next three to five years?
15. Do you have any new programs, perks or benefits to encourage employees to be productive and happy at home (office space reimbursement, flex time, etc.)?
16. How has your company handled staff management virtually?
17. Has the COVID-19 pandemic affected HR management?

18. How has COVID-19 impacted staff taking vacation time? Has your vacation policy changed as a result?
19. Are you taking any steps to support parents with kids learning remotely at home?
20. If you have had an in-person work environment, what steps will you take if one person tests positive for COVID-19?
21. If you have had an in-person work environment, what is your plan should there be a mandatory shutdown due to an outbreak?
22. Has the COVID-19 pandemic affected organizations' development in the long-term?
23. How has COVID-19 affected your business financially?
24. Has the pandemic changed your company's short- and long-term financial strategy? How?
25. Do you plan on implementing a long-term flexible or remote work option?
26. Is the impact of pandemic positive or negative in general?
27. How will the impact benefit the company strategy in a long-term run?