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What strengthens and weakens psychological safety in sales teams under Covid-19 and sudden virtuality?

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## Summary

March 2020, the world was surprised by Covid-19, a fast-spreading pandemic, which forced organizations, such as Tech-Org, to suddenly overnight work virtually. Our research setting is Tech-Org, an international organization that develops and sells HR technology. We have examined how the pandemic and sudden virtuality, as external factors, impact psychological safety in sales teams; more specifically, “what strengthens and weakens psychological safety in sales teams under Covid-19 and sudden virtuality?” We did a multiple-case study, and our research methods were semi-structured interviews and observation. Our units of analysis were three sales teams, where we interviewed 12 participants, including team members and leaders. We have constructed a table illustrating our aggregated dimensions as emerging changes with virtuality that *weaken* and *strengthen* psychological safety through our analysis. Our findings suggest that external factors urge the leaders to buffer for external uncertainty. Also, sudden virtuality exaggerates the distance and already individualized seller role. Moreover, employees grapple with the new normal and virtuality differently, where domestic relations, age, and experience are crucial. There is a gap between oldtimers and newcomers where individuals express themselves differently due to age and experience. Also, findings show that individuals struggle with informal and spontaneous interactions with virtuality due to a lack of physical cues, which leaders proactively respond to by increasing planned sessions. In addition, we found that culture, heart-to-heart and one-on-ones, digital appreciation, and virtual celebrations build interpersonal relations. Findings insinuate that employees respond to failure differently. In addition, leaders approaching uncertainty and their overall leadership are critical. In conclusion, several reactive and proactive changes weaken or strengthen PS under Covid-19 and sudden virtuality, where leaders should make changes to ensure a psychologically safe climate under uncertainty.

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# 1 Introduction

“It’s been a huge challenge. We had to send out some guides on how to do virtual meetings back to basics, and so, turn on your camera, put on your shirts, you know, bring your coffee cup like stuff like that. We were not used to it.”

At the beginning of 2020, the world faced a virus called Covid-19, which escalated into a pandemic that forced a change in how employees and leaders interacted. Everly and his colleagues (2020, p. 1) have an astonishing description of Covid-19, calling it a “disaster of uncertainty.” With the growth of the virus, revenue was strained, and companies were shocked (Spicer, 2020). The pandemic surprised and imposed companies, employees, and leaders to shift and adapt to new ways of working and collaborating. At the start of the pandemic, national authorities urged and advised organizations to ensure that their employees work from home to deal with the spread of the virus. Meyer (1982) argues that organizations that face crises due to environmental jolts such as the Covid-19 pandemic need to adjust to new realities. The new normal, such as the *home office*, is often referred to as *virtual*, while at the *office* is often referred to as *physical* throughout the study. Despite the tense situation, studies found that the pandemic increased the use of digital communication (EIU, 2020), suggesting a positive note despite a dangerous virus that impacted the world.

The pandemic caused individuals to work remotely and virtually, increasing digital communication and virtual teamwork (EIU, 2020). Inevitably, created virtual teams, defined by Townsend et al. (1998) as individuals who are not physically together but are assembled through digital means to accomplish a common goal or task. Moreover, teams socially interact and work together in a larger system (Kozlowski & Ilgen, 2006). Individuals that interact socially build interpersonal relationships, which Kahn (1990) proposes impacts psychological safety directly. Scholars further imply that when individuals feel safe psychologically in teams, they perform better (Kahn, 1990; Edmondson and Lei, 2014). The concept of psychological safety is defined by Edmondson (2018) as “a climate in which people are comfortable expressing and being themselves.” (p. XVI). Edmondson and Lei (2014) further incorporate the notion of psychological safety as a vital part of a team’s effort, performance, and ability to share, which forges teams and

psychological safety. However, most research on psychological safety theory is done on physical teams, not teams that face a pandemic and sudden virtuality.

Additionally, Edmondson (2018) proposes that psychological safety is pivotal for organizations facing intricate shifting climates, such as the unexpected pandemic of Covid-19, because that will help them withstand the negative consequences of changes. Studies on psychological safety have, as alluded to, primarily been based on physical teams, not virtual. Therefore, we seem to have found a gap in academia as we combine the concept of virtual teams and psychological safety. This research aims to examine the gap by studying: “What strengthens and weakens psychological safety in sales teams under Covid-19 and sudden virtuality?” Edmondson (1999) argues that an organization may be resilient to changes and uncertainty if it can foster PS and trust in interpersonal relationships in teams. The pandemic caused sudden virtuality, where combining psychological safety and virtuality close the gap in academia.

Our research setting is sales teams in an HR technology organization, which we refer to by the pseudonym “Tech-Org”. The organization did not lay off any employees or force the employees to expose themselves to the virus during the pandemic. The primary consequence of the external factors was that the sales departments had to work remotely and virtually in the solitude of their home. We have conducted a multiple-case study by using a semi-structured interview as the research method. The inductive approach examined the individuals in the sales teams, 12 in total, divided into three offices, including leaders and team members.

## **2 Literature Review**

The Covid-19 pandemic has led organizations, such as Tech-Org, to urge the employees to work remotely and virtually. Psychological safety (PS) is proposed to be vital for teams to succeed; however, it seems that most of the research on PS is on physical teams (Edmondson & Lei, 2014). Moreover, Edmondson (2018, p. 19) mentions that “uncertainty or interdependence (or both) combined with a lack of psychological safety compromise a recipe for suboptimal performance.” We argue that understanding PS in connection with the pandemic and sudden virtuality is critical to ensure future success in virtual teams. Therefore, the first part of the literature review will introduce PS before looking at virtual teams.

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## 2.1 Psychological Safety Theory

PS theory was first introduced in the 1960s and revived in the 1990s by an intense focus to understand the need for PS for organizations and teams to succeed (Edmondson & Lei, 2014). Additionally, how the lack of PS in teams can negatively affect individuals' performance, thus organizational success (Edmondson & Lei, 2014). Edmondson broadly defines PS as "a climate in which people are comfortable expressing and being themselves" (Edmondson, 2018, p. xvi). This definition of the concept displays a PS climate as an environment where individuals may experience a high degree of individualization and trust without fear of negativity from others.

Kahn (1990) elucidates PS as the "sense of being able to show and employ self without fear of negative consequences to self-image, status or career" (p. 705). Edmondson's definition is linked closely to Kahn's interpretation of PS, with a particular focus on an individual's ability to express *oneself* without the fear of defeatism if failure is likely. Kahn (1990) also argues that PS connects to an individual's profession and status, which we interpreted as how one experiences one's social status within a climate, for example, a work team. The definition of PS derived by Nembhard and Edmondson (2012) focuses on how individuals perceive threats in their work climate. More accurately, individuals' general belief of how comfortable they are to, for example, share, be genuine, and straightforward in the given context (Nembhard & Edmondson, 2012). Another way of understanding PS is the preconceived assumption of how others will respond to ideas, risks, questions, or other work-related settings that individuals face in interpersonal relations (Nembhard & Edmondson, 2012). Other scholars find that individuals can enact efficient discussions at an early stage to prevent issues and enable effective performance of the collective goal, hence, a psychologically safe climate (Cameron & Spreitzer, 2011). These definitions have vital suppositions in common; an individual's subjective experience of the climate, the trust and confidence to act as oneself despite the fear of failing, and the belief that others in the interpersonal relations have good intentions.

PS intertwines multiple aspects, such as trust, which must not be mixed with PS. Individuals who display trust can and are willing to depend on another and intend to be vulnerable based on affirmative expectations (Colquitt et al., 2007). The willingness to believe that others are trustworthy is based on expectations on how



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others will react, for example, to new ideas. Trust also necessitates that the individual believes the disagreeing party has good intentions. Such an expectation can be compared to PS because high levels of PS indicate that individuals are unafraid of a discussion and possible negative or constructive feedback.

Edmondson (2018) emphasizes that PS does not mean that individuals are immune to consequences or constructive feedback but allows for honest and genuine communication. An important principle supports such understanding when individuals in the climate are not held back by "interpersonal fear" (Edmondson, 2018, p. XV). Such a principle is also referred to as *silence*, contrary to *interpersonal fear* (Edmondson, 2018). This fundamental is vital to recognize as it opens up a greater understanding of PS and connects the concept to individuals' personal experiences. It allows for a subjective take on others' behavior and how one experiences similar situations. PS and the possible preconceived notions of interpersonal fear are essential to comprehend because most work performances are carried out as teams.

### *2.1.1 The Use of PS as a Variable for Understanding*

Most research on PS has been on physical teams and groups within workplaces, and the concept's application has varied (Edmondson & Lei, 2014). One example of the use of the concept PS is as an antecedent to find historical correlations with, for instance, communication and successful team performance and how PS has affected such teams (Edmondson & Lei, 2014). Therefore, understanding how PS is applied to shed light on collaboration and performance within physical formal or informal teams is crucial. The use of PS as a moderator or as an antecedent might reap different results. Scholars argue that a psychologically safe climate lays the groundwork for individuals in teams to perform better (Edmondson & Lei, 2014).

### *2.1.2 Interpersonal Relations in Teams*

Kahn's study from 1990 found that interpersonal relations and intergroup and group dynamics directly influence PS. Edmondson and Lei (2014) further focus on the influence PS has on group-level dynamics and how it affects learning, performance, and problem-solving, which are a few implications of PS. Kahn (1990) further implies that when individuals feel psychologically safe in teams, they perform better. Moreover, Kozlowski and Ilgen (2006) highlight that modern life had made teams central and indispensable to organizational progress. The chosen definition

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of teams is vital for the ongoing discussion of PS and its impact on the teams', organizations', and individuals' performance.

"(a) Two or more individuals (b) who socially interact (face-to-face or, increasingly, virtually); (c) possess one or more common goals; (d) are brought together to perform organizationally relevant tasks; (e) exhibit interdependencies with respect to workflow, goals, and outcome; (f) have different roles and responsibilities; and (g) are together embedded in an encompassing organizational system, with boundaries and linkages to the broader system context and task environment" (Kozlowski & Ilgen, 2006, p. 79).

As described in the definition above, teams socially interact to achieve a common goal, building interpersonal relations. Studies find that the preconceived notions of PS in a team are essential to organizations' and teams' performance (Edmondson & Lei, 2014). Therefore, without PS, these preconceived notions of others in a team might be harmful to the individual and team progress and may negatively affect achieving the common goal. Scholars also assert that how individuals perceive PS is often the same for those working closely together or in teams (Nembhard & Edmondson, 2012). That can be accounted for by the likelihood that members of the same teams or those working closely together are subject to the same situations and individuals, therefore, the same preconceived notions and beliefs. Such argumentation supports the predetermined notions of how PS can explain how a team perceives itself and interpersonal relations. There might be a low degree of PS within a team if they experience that specific team members have little respect for the team's workflow or goals and fear speaking out.

Historically, it has been argued that an essential factor to successful teams is, among other factors, physical environments (Goodman, Devadas, & Hughston, 1988; Campion, Medsker, and Higgs, 1993; Cohen & Ledford, 1994, referred to in Edmondson, 1999). However, these studies do not account for interpersonal relations as critical in PS studies (Edmondson, 1999). Uncertainty and sudden changes lead to a growing reliance on team performance and effectiveness to succeed (Edmondson, 1999). Generally, it seems that most studies have been done on interpersonal relations and team dynamics in physical climates (Edmondson & Lei, 2014).

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### *2.1.3 Consequences and Possibilities of PS*

To apprehend the necessity of PS, we have to look at previous research that displays the consequences of lack of PS. For organizations and teams to grow and perform successfully in uncertainty and complexity, they need the capability to learn (Unnikrishnan Nair, 2001; Bennet & Lemoine, 2014). Learning is dependent on interactions between individuals, whereas PS is essential to learning without fear of negative repercussions (Carmeli et al., 2009). These scholars further argue that behaviors that foster learning, such as asking for help or feedback on personal expertise, require high-quality interpersonal relations and PS (Carmeli et al., 2009). Other studies support this by linking learning directly to PS (Edmondson & Lei, 2014). The scholars state that an organization that cannot learn due to lack of PS might experience low decision quality and performance on the individual and team level, which has potentially detrimental effects on an organization's performance (Edmondson & Lei, 2014). Leadership behaviors can explain some team members' interpersonal risk (Edmondson & Lei, 2014). Such consequences and explanations are essential to ensure that teams and leaders understand how their behavior can influence team efforts, development, learning, and problem-solving.

### *2.1.4 Drivers that Contribute to PS in Teams*

Scholars have found different drivers contributing to PS; team characteristics such as reflections on behavior or actions, leadership behaviors, individual preconceived notions of interpersonal risks, conflict frequency, communication, and social interaction (Edmondson & Lei, 2014). Such factors can play a role in contributing to openness and learning. Kahn (1990) proposes that PS makes individuals more likely to benefit from the doubt in situations where they are less steady. Scholars have found various practical implications to PS and team efforts that enable the employees' willingness to jeopardize interpersonal risk and challenge the status quo despite leaders' inherent instinct to do as they please (Edmondson & Lei, 2014). Further, the vital and possibly underestimated need for consistent communication and planned involvement creates a psychologically safe climate in the teams and the organization (Edmondson & Lei, 2014).

Unfortunately, scholars find that “mainstream leadership theories are of little help since an environment of radical uncertainty means that leaders have less information, expertise, and resources to guide them than is often assumed”

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(Tourish, 2020, p. 261). One of the central leadership and team responses to PS is to *express appreciation*, which means to productively *listen* and *acknowledge* (Edmondson, 2018, p. 159; Edmondson, 1999). Furthermore, Edmondson (2018) established a Leader's ToolKit that aims to build PS. She argues that leaders should set the stage for the employees by, for example, stating anticipation about uncertainty, *invite participation*, and *destigmatizing failure* (Edmondson, 2018). Lastly, Edmondson (2018, p. 200) mentions one can display *interest* and *availability* by asking, e.g., "What can I do to help?" Availability and to invite participation are similar tools that both aid to fosters PS; however, displaying availability is also a tool that team members can use, not just leaders (Edmondson, 2018). However, it is essential to recognize that Edmondson (2004, cited in Edmondson & Lei, 2014) finds that circumstances such as virtuality and team complexity affect PS. These practical implications and consequences to PS have seemingly been researched on the interpersonal relations in physical teams, not virtual, which we will research.

## 2.2 Virtual Teams

PS theory suggests that PS can positively impact the interpersonal relations between individuals in teams (Edmondson & Lei, 2014). Additionally, individuals' ability to flourish (Edmondson & Lei, 2014). Since the focal point of the PS theory is teams, understanding what virtual teams are will be elucidated.

According to Townsend et al. (1998), technology has formed the new workplace to be *virtual* where possible consequences could be new productivity, adaptability, and cooperation levels. As mentioned above, under the review of PS, Kozlowski, and Ilgen (2006) define teams by different features, which will be compared to *virtual teams'* literature. Bell and Kozlowski (2002, cited in Dulebohn & Hoch, 2017) explain how virtual teams combine knowledge workers over time and separation to link work and common goals. We find similarities to Kozlowski and Ilgens' (2006) definition; however, it may seem like there is limited information on PS within virtual teams, hence, supporting the application of qualitative research to emerge theories.

### 2.2.1 Defining and Understanding Virtual versus Physical Teams

Gibson and Cohen (2003, cited in Martins et al., 2004) suggest that virtual teams are when "members use technology to interact with one another across geographic,

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organizational, and other boundaries, are becoming commonplace in organizations” (p. 805). Scholars like Dulebohn and Hoch (2017) explain that virtual teams have limited face-to-face contact and do individual work through electronic communication media to achieve common goals. The understanding of a virtual team resembles Kozlowski and Ilgen’s (2006) definition of teams. The similarities are interdependencies, the linkage between the individuals in a larger context, and the fact that both teams aim to achieve a common goal. As mentioned, interpersonal relations in teams are vital for PS, which means that the same goes for virtual teams. Team performance, interpersonal relations, and PS intertwined were referred to as separate concepts in physical environments (Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Kahn, 1990; Nembhard & Edmondson, 2012; Edmondson, 1990). Organizational studies have focused on the physical climate because that has been the most frequent and typical environment in which organizations and individuals interact. As interpersonal relations are found in virtual teams, it is essential to examine how virtuality impacts interpersonal relations to understand the consequences and possibilities on PS.

### *2.2.2 Advantages and Disadvantages to Virtual Teams*

According to Dulebohn and Hoch (2017), there are many drawbacks to virtual versus physically located teams where communication and cooperation are especially troubling. These scholars also find a potentially lower level of participation by members in a virtual team and that it is harder to create trust and share responsibility virtually (Dulebohn & Hoch, 2017). Such difficulties are closely linked to drivers put forward by Edmondson and Lei (2014) that contribute to creating PS climates in teams. As mentioned, studies on PS have not been performed on virtual teams, which means that we question if such challenges increase the risk of lower PS. We argue that to create PS in a virtual team, a high degree of communication and collaboration between team members would likely foster and strengthen interpersonal relations.

The pioneers behind PS argue that consistent communication is critical for team success (Edmondson & Lei, 2014), supporting some success with virtual teams by Dulebohn and Hoch (2017). Studies by Bailey and colleagues (2019) propose many future possibilities, especially as technology is continuously evolving, creating new ways of communicating virtually. In the gap between PS and virtual teams, we ask

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whether teams and organizations can fully use the possibilities present in today's technology to build a psychologically safe climate.

### *2.2.3 Leaders Managing Interpersonal Relations in Virtual Teams*

Most scholars agree that virtual team management is more challenging than physical teams (Davis & Bryant, 2003; Hick & Kozlowski, 2014, cited in Dulebohn & Hoch, 2017). Teams have previously been referred to as individuals who interact, which signifies that teams consist of interpersonal relations. In addition to the disadvantage mentioned above, the leaders tend to have less influence and less information about the team's status virtually, therefore, suggesting that the leaders' team management of processes and dynamics may be harmed (Dulebohn & Hoch, 2017). Although there is growing attention toward virtual teams, there is a lack of knowledge on successfully managing virtual teams (Dulebohn & Hoch, 2017).

Feitosa and Salas (2020) propose that a challenge for organizations is how to foster inclusion through PS in virtual interpersonal relations. This leads us to how to deal with each member's local context while ensuring that everyone's voice is heard. Other challenges like isolation and detachment are infuriated by the ongoing pandemic (Feitosa & Salas, 2020). Therefore, ensuring PS could bolster interpersonal relations in virtual teams (Feitosa & Salas, 2020). Another way to encourage inclusion in a virtual climate is to spot similarities between the team members, as similarities can create a feeling of belongingness (Feitosa & Salas, 2020). The scholars further propose that some degree of face-to-face interactions foster inclusion through PS (Feitosa & Salas, 2020). The feeling of belonging to a team and create solid interpersonal relations can be a problem in every team, not just a virtual one. Also, how the effect face-to-face interactions might have on belongingness and interpersonal relations. Nevertheless, the proper use of technology might reap benefits, such as allowing for getting to know one's team members better and creating strong interpersonal relations because one can see how they live and see each other's faces.

### *2.2.4 Possibilities with Virtuality*

Bailey and colleagues (2019) write about possible challenges to dealing with more use of technology, mainly referring to socialization and communication, that we believe impact PS. A positive note on the possibilities of technology is that one might argue that it can positively influence PS in teams if used correctly. However,

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our research examines the virtual aspect of PS, which seems to be untouched in literature, more accurately, how employees' PS is affected by sudden virtuality in uncertainty and complexity. The trend towards creating virtual teams has been accelerated due to Covid-19, as most teams – whether previously physical or not – are now keeping in touch almost entirely online (The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), 2020). Also, Dulebohn and Hoch (2017) argue how the explosive growth of virtual teams is expected to continue in the future. Suppose organizations and teams work primarily virtually; it is necessary to examine how to tackle the crucial aspect of PS in interpersonal relations in virtual teams because organizations are highly dependent on interactions, belongingness, and interpersonal risks to succeed.

### **3 The Research Methodology**

In a period of five months during the Covid-19 pandemic, we studied sales teams in the international technology company “Tech-Org.” Since one of the researchers works part-time at Tech-Org, they allowed us to research the organization. In addition, the researcher's employment provided us with access to information on the research setting. Moreover, we found Tech-Org compelling because most of the employees were given a home office order at the start of the pandemic. The home office order meant that the employees suddenly had to work virtually and remotely from mid-March 2020. Also, the organization faced uncertainty because the economy was at a halt due to the pandemic. About 200 Tech-Org employees are located at offices spread across countries, where approximately 35 individuals work directly with sales. Tech-Org's country managers helped us get in touch with the units. They decided the teams based on feasibility, such as availability, time, participants' motivation, and their willingness to devote unpaid time (Bell et al., 2019).

#### **3.1 Tech-Org - The Research Setting**

Tech-Org merged four companies and was established in late 2019. The organization is based in Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Finland, and the Netherlands. Naturally, such an extensive and comprehensive merge had its challenges, especially while facing a pandemic. The organization develops and sells HR technology solutions to the private and public markets. The products are all within the segment of HR, for example, recruitment, employee follow-up, and other HR-related needs. According to Covid-19 and its consequences, one leader shared, “In



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the same situation, if you guys remember, it stopped. It was pretty brutal, actually. It stopped,” thus, demonstrating the severity of the situation for Tech-Org. Nevertheless, Tech-Org was fortunate as the management did not have to lay off anyone during the pandemic.

The focus will be on the Scandinavian countries throughout the study because the larger sales teams are located there. Also, since the research setting looks at similar sales teams in Tech-Org, and Scandinavian culture is somewhat comparable, this research setting is ideal. (Warner-Søderholm, 2012) looks at cultural identity in Scandinavia and found that the communities seem to believe in egalitarian principles intrinsically, which is demonstrated in our research setting. Another consideration put forward by Warner-Søderholm (2012) is that Scandinavian employees appear to appreciate directness, agreement when making decisions, and a low power distance. By being aware of the cultural aspects in Scandinavian countries, we can better understand what thrives Tech-Org’s Scandinavian culture as they deal with virtuality.

The sellers speak about a shared understanding of their mission and expectations of their role in Tech-Org, which seems similar across the Scandinavian countries. A seller’s primary mission is to get clients to purchase the product that the organization is selling, in this case, HR technology. There is a sales team leader in every country, and the sellers are split into different segments. Some work towards the public sector and tenders, while others focus on the private market. All sellers report to a country sales team leader, who reports to their country manager. It seems that employees in Tech-Org can go straight to top management and the other way around due to the egalitarian structure. How these sales teams experienced sudden virtuality is subjective and allows for deep reflections on the situation. Therefore, we found Tech-Org to be exemplary to study “what strengthens and weakens psychological safety in sales teams under Covid-19 and sudden virtuality?”

### **3.2 Qualitative Research Strategy**

We have chosen to conduct a qualitative research strategy, which requires “generating theories inductively rather than testing theories that are specified at the outset” (Bell et al., 2019, p. 360). Our motive was to look at the reality from the participants’ point of view and understand how virtuality and the lack of physical and face-to-face interactions affect PS, enhancing a qualitative research design.



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Also, Bell and her colleagues' (2019) outline of qualitative research's main steps allowed us to give a tighter specification of the research question throughout the study. A qualitative research design allowed us to *sensitize concepts* we found relevant and vital for our research (Bell et al., 2019, p. 360). Our sensitizing concepts were divided into two dimensions; "emerging changes with virtuality that weakens psychological safety" and "emerging changes with virtuality that strengthens psychological safety." The outline and the sensitizing concepts formulated our research question to be "what strengthens and weakens psychological safety in sales teams under Covid-19 and sudden virtuality?"

### 3.2.1 *Multiple-Case Study Research Design*

Research design is a framework or structure within which the collection and analysis of data occur where a case study design seems more relevant for our research (Bell et al., 2019). What recognizes a case study is that the researcher is usually concerned with emphasizing a case study's unique feature, which is the purpose of our research. Further, we chose to use a *multiple-case* study design in order to answer our research question. Bell and her colleagues (2019, p. 67) explain that a multiple-case study design is considered in a comparative design as they are mainly undertaken to compare cases. Therefore, this design allowed us to compare and contrast the findings deriving from each case or individuals, which encouraged us to examine uniqueness and what is shared across cases while doing a theoretical reflection on the findings (Bell et al., 2019).

We investigated the sales teams as units and *their daily life* with virtual interaction, which argues this to be a typical case study (Yin, 2003, cited in Bell et al., 2019). Furthermore, according to Stake (1995, cited in Bell et al., 2019), the selection of case studies is encouraged by the opportunity to learn. As mentioned in the introduction and literature review, we believed that academia and empiricism are limited, indicating the most significant learning. Our cases could also be perceived as instrumental cases and/or collective cases where we investigate to understand a broader issue and explore a general phenomenon (Stake, 1995, cited in Bell et al., 2019).

### 3.2.2 *Groups as Our Unit of Analysis*

We examined organizational units, more accurately, groups (van Aken & Berends, 2018). The groups will be referred to as teams or sales teams, which already existed

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in Tech-Org to maintain an inductive approach and is appropriate for a multiple-case study. Moreover, we conducted a *homogeneous sampling* to examine similar units to get more in-depth (van Aken & Berends, 2018). We have researched three sales teams in Norway, Sweden, and Denmark, including team members and leaders. There are 12 participants in total – 5 in the Norwegian office, 4 in the Swedish office, and 3 in the Danish office. The individuals in the teams socially interact to reach their personal goals and the common goals and have different responsibilities in the organization. In other words, despite there being a unit in each office, the team concept is versatile.

In the methodological literature, selecting the cases to compare and analyze is called sampling, a subset of the population (Bell et al., 2019; van Aken & Berends, 2018). The reason for choosing the sales teams is that we wanted to narrow down to a group of people that seem to have the same characteristics and possibly the same needs. However, we kept differences like demographics, life situations, and personal attributes in mind. Although we examine homogeneous groups, we assumed that such sales teams are similar in characteristics and needs, which could be rejected and considered throughout the investigation. The samples are cases in the unit teams; specifically, we interviewed the individuals. Furthermore, we perceived the chosen unit of analysis to be appropriate since we wanted to investigate how virtuality affects PS in sales teams.

When it comes to sampling, qualitative research strategy emphasizes purposive sampling, where the goal is to sample cases/participants strategically so that they are relevant to the research question (Bell et al., 2019). In addition, purposive sampling does not allow the researcher to generalize to a population. We were able to sample a more significant portion of the population – the three teams. Therefore, research can be generalized to other sales teams or, more generally to that kind of team setting.

Moreover, in grounded theory, it may be impossible to know how many we should interview before theoretical saturation is achieved, in other words, when no theoretical insights are being generated (Bell et al., 2019). In our research, the participants individually gave us valuable insights, but a clear majority of participants had similar responses. Thus, we believe theoretical saturation was somewhat limited in hindsight as we strived to get more data to answer the research question.

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### 3.3 Research Methods

#### 3.3.1 *Semi-structured Interview*

According to Bell and her colleagues (2019), a research method is a technique for collecting data, where the interview is seemingly the most extensively used method in qualitative research. We were interested in the interviewees' points of view, so *semi-structured interviews* were appropriate as it is flexible in collecting rich and detailed answers. A semi-structured interview was more relevant than an unstructured interview as we do not want to convey a 'conversational interviewing.' We used an *interview guide* covering questions on the specific topics of *psychological safety* and *virtual teams*. A semi-structured interview opened up for us to follow the interview guide in flexibility and have similar wording from interviewee to interviewee (Bell et al., 2019).

We followed a script to a certain extent, depending on the interviewees' responses. However, we emphasized three "red threads" in the interviews; to share stories and examples, to compare physical and virtual interactions (before and during Covid-19), and lastly, stories on team members and leaders, not clients. In addition, Bell and her colleagues (2019) argue that since we were more than one person doing the fieldwork, we ensured comparability in the interviewing style by conducting a semi-structured interview.

#### 3.3.2 *Online Interviews*

According to EIU (2020), the pandemic has caused people to start working remotely, increasing their digital communications and virtual collaboration. As a result, we conducted the interviews online, more accurately Teams. In addition, every participant used cameras, although we informed them that camera was voluntary. Also, we were aware of the advantages of online interviewing, such as cost and time saving due to the geographical distance, and that there is little evidence that the interviewer's capacity to report is significantly weakened (Bell et al., 2019). However, we were also aware of the limitations of online interviews; for instance, we had a poor Wi-Fi connection during an interview.

#### 3.3.3 *Language Barriers*

To begin with, we interviewed in our language, Norwegian, with the local office. We had the intention to continue interviewing in Norwegian as the level of

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understanding across the Scandinavian countries is seemingly high. However, there were linguistic challenges when we interviewed the second Swede. Therefore, we realized we had to switch to English before pursuing the interview, which created a greater flow of understanding. Subsequently, we found several advantages to interviewing in English; we ensured understanding from both parties, and the transcribing was more manageable than in Scandinavian languages. Therefore, we translated our interview guide to English. That being said, we asked the participants if they were comfortable with enacting the interview in English, where all of them affirmed.

### *3.3.4 Taking the Lead on Interviews*

Due to doing online interviews, we interviewed separately from home office. We took every other *lead* on the interviews, which means to interview according to the interview guide. The second researcher introduced and completed the interview while taking notes and adding follow-up questions. We had an online document where we took notes during the interview, where we also communicated to ensure that the questions and answers were understood. When one of the researchers had, for instance, a bad Wi-Fi connection, we were flexible and adapted by changing the assigned lead role.

### *3.3.5 Recording and Transcribing*

In our informed consent, we shared with the participants that we will record the interview and that they can withdraw if they reject the recording or if they felt uncomfortable during the interview. Then, we uploaded the files on a software program that transcribed the recordings. We had to go through every interview to tweak whatever the program missed. We transcribed every other interview – the ones we did not lead, making sure we both had equal insights and understanding of the data.

### *3.3.6 Secondary Research Method - Observation*

Our secondary research method was *observation*, where we observed a weekly online meeting with one of the teams to get further insights into our data and ensure our objectivity. The team leader informed the participants beforehand, resulting in not recording the meeting.

### 3.4 Analysis

After we transcribed, we coded our interviews. First, we coded regarding the *themes* we had emphasized in the literature review and interview guide. The coding was done on a comprehensive Excel sheet where we coded the participants individually and collected the coding according to their countries. Next, we color-coded the most compelling stories and sensitized concepts. Then, regardless of the themes, we “got physical” and identified our sensitizing concepts, and used A3 papers to divide the concepts. Finally, we printed out all of the transcribed interviews and the coding from the Excel sheet, and we used scissors to cut out the statements we found most intriguing and placed them to the relevant concept.

After an extensive data collection and analysis, two dimensions have become apparent; “emerging changes with virtuality that weakens PS” and “emerging changes with virtuality that strengthens PS.” There are four and three emerging categories within the two dimensions visualized in Table 1 Progression of Coding.

First-Order Categories	Aggregate Dimension
Encourage asking questions Fear of redundancy Leaders Emphasizing to Shift Focus under Uncertainty	Leaders buffering for external uncertainty

  

First-Order Categories	Second Order Categories	Aggregate Dimensions
Individual goals The seller role - "I have my own little company" "You're very much a star, or you're a loser" Good trust comes with working individually Individualistic work habits reinforced by Covid-19 The organization tweaks to enable physical onboarding	Increased individualized work	Emerging changes with virtuality that weakens PS
Expressing themselves comes with age and experience Age and experience affects the need for physical interaction	Gap between oldtimers and newcomers	
Overwhelmed by the new normal of virtuality Domestic relations and home office	Employees grapple with adapting to the "new normal" and virtuality	
Shift in virtual interactions compared to physical Less spontaneous interactions virtually Asking for help and five minutes is challenging The lack of the Coffee Machine Camera is a necessity virtually Virtual tools limits and weakens interactions	Higher barriers to informal spontaneous virtual interactions	Emerging changes with virtuality that strengthens PS
Leaders have increased planned formal meetings virtually Social and informal interactions have to be planned Phony socialization virtually	Increased scheduled interactions to boost informal virtual interactions	
Culture, high ceiling and bantering Heart-to-heart / One-on-One (leadership initiatives) Digital appreciations Virtual celebrations Emojis - digital feedback (Slack)	Building interpersonal relations	
Culture of smooth ride The fear of failure as a seller No "pink skies" and the need to talk about failure	Responding to failure	

Table 1 - Progression of Coding

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### 3.5 Ethical Concerns and Reflections

With *informed consent* (Bell et al., 2019, p. 592) from participants, we ensured that the participants were given as much information needed to make an informed decision of whether they want to participate. The anonymization of the interviewees was done by not collecting any pictures, e-mail, name, or other information to trace the interview back to the interviewees. Furthermore, we did not collect sensitive personal data in our study, which means that we did not consider such ethical concerns. As mentioned earlier, before holding the interview, we informed the participants that the interview would be recorded and transcribed. After the research, the recorded interviews were deleted. We applied for consent at Norsk senter for forskningsdata (NSD) which got approved. NSD added that we should avoid getting deeper into psychosocial health at the workplace in the interviews, which we did.

As Bell and her colleagues (2019), mention researchers must be aware of the ethical issues that may appear at different points throughout the research process. We need to protect our study's integrity and business research reputation more generally (Bell et al., 2019). Moreover, business research ethics revolve around discussions about how we should treat the individuals in the teams we research and unethical activities. Therefore, it is vital for researchers to continuously revisit ethical considerations throughout their study (Bell et al., 2019).

#### 3.5.1 *Ethical Obligations Towards Society*

As researchers, it is essential to consider the ethical obligations we have towards society. Our study aims to look at a general phenomenon to explore a potential broader issue. In such a case, we had to recognize that our findings might not reflect society as a whole but might indicate a potential general phenomenon in society. Such a phenomenon could link PS and virtuality and how changes or possible consequences can negatively affect society. Ethically, there should be further examination of the phenomenon to ensure that society can be aware of the potential harm.

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### 3.5.2 *Ethical Considerations and Respect for Individuals and Ensuring Anonymity*

To ensure anonymity, we created the pseudonym “Tech-Org” for the organization and anonymized information that may reveal the organization’s or the participants’ identity. We refer to the participants as, e.g., individuals, employees, or leaders with *randomized gender*. Thus, the participants might recognize their statements, and the gender applied, and if the gender happened to be correct, notice that it would be by coincidence. Also, the three Scandinavian offices or countries have been named A, B, and C by randomization.

When closing the interviews, we informed the participants that they would receive a transcribed edition of their interview. By doing so they could approve that the transcribed edition of the interviews were their words. We edited the transcribed interviews if the participant identified inaccuracies. All the participants approved the transcribed interviews after minor adjustments. In addition, we ensured the participants anonymity when asked about confidentiality or information that could lead back to the participants.

Our study was conducted on a team level and the interviews were on individuals in the sales teams. Regarding the ethical considerations and respect for the individuals in such teams, we had to be aware of potentially sensitive issues. That is because the concept of PS might open up for vulnerability; for example, if the interviewee is afraid of being honest or repercussions about a sensitive issue (Bell et al., 2019). Therefore, ethically, as researchers, we were clear about how we intended to protect and fully anonymize the interviewees to ensure no blowback for potentially sensitive issues or other concerns the individuals might have.

As previously mentioned, we had to inform the individuals adequately about the project, so they had the opportunity to decline, to take part, or to withdraw without consequences, also known as informed consent. However, some scholars argue that informed consent might have unintended negative consequences on the data quality; this is a matter that we had to be aware of because if we antagonize or alienate the participants, we might get incorrect data (Crow et al., 2006).

### 3.5.3 *Respect for the Interests of Firms/Institutions*

Ethically, we did what is suitable for the study and respected the organization. Although one of the researchers works part-time in Tech-Org and suppose some

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findings might be harmful for the organization, we would have to respectfully inform the company while not changing or covering up potential negativity, thus, maintaining objectivity. We have discussed such a situation with the company and informed that we as researchers would not change anything to favor them but be honest, objective, and respectful. If we did not behave with respect and honesty, the organization would not benefit from the study when learning and developing.

Throughout the study, we found that some individuals seemed *exceptional* in tackling PS in this specific situation. We did our best to balance these individuals by ensuring that findings reflected the multitude of individuals in the research setting. Ethically, we did what is suitable for the study and respected the organization.

### *3.5.4 Interacting with the Research Community*

As researchers, we have behaved ethically and correctly when interacting with the research community by always citing and referring to previous studies to explain or describe findings or research.

## **4 Findings**

We found that the pandemic and sudden virtuality urges the leaders in Tech-Org to buffer for external uncertainty. In addition, our findings are; individualized work is increased due to the pandemic, the gap between oldtimers and newcomers, employees grapple with adapting to “the new normal” and virtuality, higher barriers to informal spontaneous virtual interactions, increased scheduled interactions to boost informal virtual interactions, building interpersonal relations virtually and lastly, responding to failure.

### **4.1 Leaders Buffering for External Uncertainty**

The following findings illustrate how the leaders address uncertainty to the team members. During a Monday meeting with the team, one leader restrained herself from talking about the number of booked meetings during a week going from 20 to zero “week after week after week.” Therefore, she initiated conversations saying that “this is okay.” The statement below displays how she put forward the uncertainty early in the pandemic.

“This is a natural consequence of the situation we’re in. We’re not firing anyone at the moment, but we need to shift our focus and make the best out



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of the situation. (...) and [upper management has] been very clear that we're not like, as of now, we're not firing people. We want to make this work, and I think that was like a huge comfort, and then they started raising questions like, okay, then how will it be if we continue this pace for two months, we're getting fired then - it's healthy because questions they didn't dare to ask."

There are several compelling insights in the story above, such as the management's acknowledgment of the pandemic's uncertainty and, consequently, the need for support. Due to the uncertainty and support, the leader encourages team members to ask questions, described as "healthy." This description indicates that the pandemic pressures individuals out of their comfort zone. In addition, to ask questions in this setting implies that the sellers did not dare to ask difficult questions until after being supported by the leader. We find it interesting that the leader had to reassure the individuals by saying, "we're not firing anyone."

#### Fear of Redundancy

The leader above shares that losing the job is a serious concern for several team members. Naturally, the sales teams observing the numbers going down to zero make them worried about keeping their jobs. She adds,

"Well, very scared. Scared of losing the job in a global pandemic. Like when you see, and everything you read on the news is - pardon me, what is that in English - people losing their job, getting paused and stuff like that, and you know that the market is not good."

The leader shares that the individuals are *very scared* of losing their jobs, which indicates the tense situation. Observing how the pandemic influences the world economies seems frightening for the individuals, perhaps, due to a seller's work description. An individual elaborated on how the seller role itself is positively associated with the concern for being laid off, maybe even before the pandemic. He says that "I have been concerned at some point with the long term because when you're in sales, if you don't deliver, normally, typically in other organizations, you're going to be fired." Therefore, the pandemic and the inevitable uncertainty combined with the pressure as a seller illustrates the individuals' concerns and uneasiness. A leader shares a story, which illustrates what is expected of the sellers,

"So, it was really hard for everyone, and also talking about it because I think [the team members] came to a realization that the target is the target. And

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my measurements, they're still the same, the numbers. We could show understanding, especially in the beginning, but after a while, we need to run a business as usual. We need to make money, especially in sales.”

#### Leaders Emphasizing to Shift Focus under Uncertainty

The statement above implies that the pandemic and the expectations of the seller role combined with the uncertainty creates considerable concern. The leader herself also got worried, which indicates high levels of uncertainty regardless of position,

“So, I became super afraid after a while because the market just went into a total shutdown. And that's when we realized that this is okay. Let's now shift the focus, focusing on how to, you know, strengthen our confidence within the product, selling and preparing for when the market starts to open. We had that conversation about we're not going to be maniacs about your numbers in this period.”

As mentioned, the leader shared, “we're not firing anyone at the moment, but we need to shift our focus and make the best out of the situation.” Thus, the leader could be perceived as exemplary in a time of uncertainty, especially in how she redirects the team by emphasizing *shifting focus*. Moreover, further insights demonstrate how the leader uses the situation as an opportunity for creative exercise,

“(…) keeping us together as a team and trying to shift the focus that, okay, well, the situation in the market is like this, then we should enhance the competence internally in the team. So, I scheduled a lot of sessions rewarding and onboarding kind of program that went for a month where everyone could participate just as a team.”

This narrative implies that the pandemic forces the individuals to emphasize building competency within the team for the business to endure. The leader seems to implement specific strategies, for instance, “sessions rewarding and onboarding kind of program.” Such initiative makes the teams shift focus and use the uncertainty to their advantage by becoming better equipped for the current and future market.

We asked another individual if he was worried about how the leader would react to his bad results,

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“No, not really. I think [leader] is very good at being understanding towards that. This is a complex product, and there’s going to be - we have a period where it was very low. I did two sales last week, so it was very good, but there’s been a lot of long periods where I didn’t do any sales, and [leader] has an understanding of sometimes that’s going to happen. [Leader] is very like positive saying ‘just get back there, just believe that it is going to happen.’ [Leader] is more of a pep talk kind of [person] not saying, ‘why didn’t this - why didn’t you succeed with this? What are the issues, and why did you do this? Or ABC.’ [Leader] is not like that, [leader] is very much a pep talker who says, ‘don’t worry about it, just look straight ahead. Just move forward.’”

The leader, as a pep talker, shifts focus and sets expectations under uncertain times. In addition, this emphasizes the high pressure of being a seller – if a seller does not deliver, he or she is most likely to lose their job. Findings indicate that the pandemic seems to increase such concerns. Therefore, such communication implies that the leaders are aware of the team members’ worries and focus on opportunity and a forward-looking mindset. Overall, the leadership in Tech-Org is a critical factor when researching PS under Covid-19 and sudden virtuality. We find that leadership sets the foundation for initiating actions that might foster PS.

## **4.2 Emerging Changes with Virtuality that Weakens Psychological Safety**

The emerging changes in this dimension visualize how virtuality exaggerates individualized work and increases distance, the gap between oldtimers and newcomers in Tech-Org, how employees grapple with adapting to the "new normal" and virtuality, and lastly, higher barriers to informal spontaneous virtual interactions.

### *4.2.1 Increased Individualized Work*

Findings suggest that team members support each other, yet the expectations for sales are high. “It’s a culture of supporting each other but also, very ambitious, like there’s these high expectations, too. There’s a self-driven culture. I would say it’s expected that you think of solutions.” We question if such high expectations might be convulsed by the pandemic, if it is due to individualistic roles, or if the shift in focus impacts the expectations.

Nonetheless, several individuals indicate that there is a feeling of *teamwork*. “I just totally trust my team members that - Okay, we’re all in this together. We have the same goals. I feel like the culture that we have in [Tech-Org] is really inspiring.” He describes the culture in Tech-Org as positive and collective. This perception is supported by another individual who shares that,

“Everyone is pitching in 120 percent, and everyone wants the best for everyone, and we have a very good culture. So, I guess it’s very positive, creative, engaged, and, yeah, it’s a very good place to be. I love it. (...) It’s one of the best places I’ve ever been, actually. So, yeah, that’s because of the humans, I guess.”

Moreover, an individual shares that they respect each other and know each other’s strengths and weaknesses. The culture in Tech-Org seems to rely on teamwork, valuing each other, and looking at common goals. In addition, the individuals describe themselves as extroverts and social, open to help and support each other and share knowledge and experiences. Despite such social interactions, they work *individually* towards personal goals. “Being responsible for your own results” implies that you are individually responsible for your success where defining goals is necessary. An individual states that “it’s a very, very, very independent job because we have our own goals. (...) we know what our goal is and what the common goals are, but (...) I concentrate on reaching my own goals, actually.” Another individual states that “No, I do not feel the need to have common goals. For us, it is relatively simple, we should deliver whatever promised to be delivered.” The “one-man army”-mindset is well-represented among the individuals, indicating that the sellers’ roles rely on individualized deliveries.

#### The Seller Role – “I Have My Own Little Company”

The seller role consists of individualized work while signaling competition and delivering results. An individual explains that “in sales compared to many other disciplines and in just every company, you’re very much a star, or you’re a loser.” Several individuals mention that they have their “own little company,” which enhances individualized work. Another individual shares, “it will necessarily be a bit individual because you get assigned a customer, and it is yours.” He adds, “there are few who interfere with what I do, so to speak. I kind of run my own small business down in the corner where I make sure to deliver as well as possible.” This

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statement affirms how individuals “run their own business” although being part of a team. One of these individuals says that “it is very much liberty regarding responsibility (...). You are responsible for your own results.” This statement illustrates the individualized work and how the sellers work freely - as long as they deliver results.

Moreover, the seller role and individualized work appear to be connected to *trust*. We did not specify the meaning of trust during the interview, making the term vague and subjective. Here, it seems like trust refers to how the leaders do not have to micro-manage them but rather trust them working freely and individually. “So, we never had this eight-to-four kind of micro-management mentality. It has not been like that.” Furthermore, when we asked an individual how he experiences trust, he answers that “good trust” comes with working individually. Another compelling statement supporting the aspect of trust is the following,

“(...) it’s the atmosphere, and the expectations towards the team members is that we trust what you do. How you get there is your own way, but we trust that you do what you do and what is expected of you. So that’s very nice.”

Again, the individuals’ ways of working illustrate how trust reflects the expectations for the seller role. The mindset is that as long as the team members deliver and make money for Tech-Org, they are trusted to have as much distance and space as needed. However, the “given” space is controversial as the organization practically expects individuals to work individually. A newly hired and experienced individual shares,

“(...) it was just like we trust you, that you have the skills you say you have and can show the results that you say you can show. So, it’s not something we talk about with that word, actually, it’s just implicit.”

The finding below supports how trust from the leader builds on individualized work. “It’s very easy to see if you need to be monitored or you just deliver,” this quote makes us question how the individuals might experience reaching out to a leader if something is difficult and how that affects trust. On the other hand, the finding also signifies that the employees indicate that the leaders give as much freedom as possible unless the seller does not deliver, alluding to levels of trust.

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This aspect enhances our suggestion that the seller role increases the distance between the employees, exaggerated in a virtual setting.

“So, it’s a very much free team that doesn’t really need much management because we’re performing on our own. (...) there have to be some management (...) but here, I mean, you work in sales. It’s very easy to see if you need to be monitored or you just deliver. Right. So, if you deliver the results, of course, naturally the trust is there, because you are earning money for the company.”

#### Individualistic Work Habits Reinforced by Covid-19

It is crucial to identify findings that illustrate if Covid-19 has reinforced individualized work habits. An employee shares, “I feel very free” in making decisions. Moreover, she says, “I think that it’s going to be like that also after the [Covid-19], that I am allowed to make my own decisions on where I would like to work, and I like that a lot. I don’t like someone telling me what to do.” Another individual shares that,

“even before the [Covid-19], I wasn’t much of a team player. (...) I like the lone wolf style. I like being myself. I like doing things my own way. I hate to depend on others. I’d rather do it myself.”

The statement enhances how she as a seller prefers to work independently and individually, even pre-Covid-19. The statements indicate appreciation for distance and that distance is embedded in the seller role regardless of external factors.

Moreover, the individual above shares, “if you had a way of working before [Covid-19], which I had, which was pretty isolated, that for sure got a lot stronger during and after [Covid-19].” At the same time, she mentions that the increased distance and isolation are not troubling due to her life situation. Thus, the finding indicates that the consequences of Covid-19 are not necessarily a burden. Instead, it gives the individuals the opportunity to adapt in favor of personal preferences.

“I think those people like me got sort of more closed since that’s the way it is, and it doesn’t have to be a bad thing. For me, it works. I like that way of working, and it’s super fine. I don’t have a problem at all with [Covid-19]. I don’t mind not seeing my colleagues every day (...). They miss having

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someone to talk to. So that social interaction, I don't have a problem with that. Of course, I like my colleagues, but I don't - it's fine."

### The Organization Tweaks to Enable Physical Onboarding

External factors oblige the companies to do home office or select who can go to the office. It may seem that such regulations are unproblematic for sellers as they work individually; however, there are exceptions. We find evidence that the *newly hired employees* are prioritized to get physical interaction and training the first two weeks. Several individuals share stories that indicate how the interactions between the so-called "onboardees" and their mentors are maximized for the first couple of weeks of their onboarding. Although the physical interaction seems conflicting to how the sellers work, we suggest that the organization train the new employees to work individually, consequently leading to interpersonal distance between the team members. One individual shares the story below when we asked about virtual onboarding,

"Well, I'm going to be honest, I'm probably not the right person to kind of speak on that because I've been instructing my onboardees to kind of get in the office at least the first two weeks, so we can get to know each other and see each other, to talk to each other, help each other out when it comes to those small things that pop up all the time because it's got to be super hard to kind of have 'Okay, I need help with this, okay, take five minutes, we'll talk on Slack,' then we hang out and then five minutes later it's like, 'Hey, it's me again. I got this thing.'"

The individual above gives us many essential and noteworthy insights. This finding alludes to the perk of physical interactions as a new employee. Another individual supports the perk by saying, "Of course, you also get to know those in the office better because you get to talk to each other a little outside the meetings, and in that sense, one gets more into the group". It is perceived as crucial that newly hired sellers can socialize and become a part of the group.

Moreover, a leader shares that the urgent home office order was worse for new employees. She explains, "(...) when it comes to trust, the new employees, they didn't have that chance to establish. They weren't able to meet their closest colleagues." This statement suggests that physical interactions are critical when establishing trust, especially for new employees. However, after the two weeks of

onboarding, the employees have to do home office. Then, they would have to work according to the seller role, where individualized work and external factors limit physical interactions, hence, enhancing our suggestion on increasing already established distance.

#### *4.2.2 Gap Between Oldtimers and Newcomers*

There seem to be different approaches to how individuals express themselves when it comes to individualized work and virtuality. An individual shares that he tries to be a loving and energized person all the time also virtually. “I think a lot of ways I feel like – I do have a lot of energy. I’m a happy [person], I try to kind of be that [person] in Slack for most of the time.” He adds, “that is super important, because if I’m sharing, if I’m being myself, I think that can inspire other people to be that same, be that on their own as well,” which indicates that the individual appreciates people for who they are and that they should express themselves, even virtually. In addition, a new employee shares that with time in Tech-Org, she becomes more herself as her colleagues back her up,

“I become more and more myself. Daily, actually. In a work context with experience and safety to the others in the team and the leader, I feel that I become myself more and more in my daily approach towards both clients and internally and in situations where one has to show something, tell something, or present something. Because one knows that one kind of is backed up. To answer your question, yes, more and more myself.”

There seems to be a connection with the age as oldtimers are comfortable with expressing themselves. An individual shares, “I’m always 100 percent who I am, I guess, I’m that old, so, there’s no filter. Myself, all the time, I guess.” Another example is the following quote,

“I would say that it’s an age thing (...) it’s easier for me to be myself full out now than it was like maybe 15 years ago. (...) I’m still quite new in my work, but I’m trying to be as me as possible from the beginning.”

As mentioned earlier, a new employee shares that she becomes herself more with time in the organization. At the same time, the stories above indicate that expressing oneself comes as one gets older and gains experience. However, expressing oneself 100% is probably out-of-reach, “No, is anyone? I don’t think so. In that case, I think it is such a small self-deception that you think you are yourself 100%.” The



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statement indicates that one has to balance expressing themselves and perhaps, according to what is socially acceptable in Tech-Org. The same individual shares that there is no difference in expressing himself virtually vs. physically. Another oldtimer shares,

“I feel like I’m pretty much myself (...). I feel very confident in myself also because I have been there for so long and know most people. Then I dare to say what I mean and such, but then, I do not like conflicts, so I always try to balance them - by trying always to think it through. Sometimes it blows up, but I try to think about it.”

The above individual shares how she tries to balance her expressions in order to avoid conflicts. When it comes to virtually versus physically, she adds that there is no difference, implying that one can express oneself with age and experience regardless of the setting. Like the individual above, other individuals also share that they have to filter or try to balance their expressions, so there is no personal interference.

Another individual shares that he is himself and a see-through person – “what you see is what you get.” He further adds, “and sometimes if I speak before I think and maybe it’s too hard or anything, I apologize afterwards because I am aware that some people are more sensitive to words than I am.” Such findings indicate that the culture is very open for employees to express themselves where they become themselves with experience and time. Although there is a gap between oldtimers and newcomers when they express themselves, individuals see the need to adapt accordingly to their colleagues and the situation.

#### Age and Experience Affects the Need for Physical Interaction

Young and new employees seem to appreciate physical social interactions. An employee shares that she was on her way to the office for lunch with colleagues during the online interview, which indicates her appreciation for social interaction at the office. When we asked another individual if the team had any virtual social gatherings, he described a scenario “(...), okay, now we have worked for a while, we deserve to go to the store and get some beers now”. However, it has been harder for his team to get “lønningspils” or beers after payroll due to lockdowns. He adds that there are no virtual “lønningspils,” but those at the office go together after a long day at the store to get some beers. Such statements indicate how he values

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physical social interactions and that *virtual* social interaction is inadequate for younger and newly hired employees. One of the older and long-tenured shares he feels sorry for the younger generation in the virtual sphere,

“But if I had only been virtual and heard of someone, [colleague] would have been just a hovering person. When you see people physically and can ask questions, you have a face to relate to. I do not think it is good for [the younger] generation, who cannot experience and meet people right now. For me, this has been great. I get to spend time with my [spouse]. We eat lunch together and walk (...) after work. We have a great time.”

The statement above indicates that some do not request being at the office. Those individuals are perhaps the contrary to young and new, hence, older and experienced. The younger individuals experience considerable pressure to deliver - “it is hard being a young seller, where some have quit.” Overall, age and experience seem to affect the necessity for interactions, especially as findings suggest that the seller role is individualized and demanding.

#### 4.2.3 *Employees Grapple with Adapting to “the New Normal” and Virtuality*

Regarding uncertainty and adapting to sudden virtuality, an individual shares he had private commitments, challenging him to balance with a home office. A newly hired employee in Tech-Org shares, “I also had to, you know, just get a fresh up of what you expect for me, really, because [of] the stress (...)” The statement implies that the individual felt overwhelmed in his “new normal,” where the leader and the team member set expectations at work for him to adapt to external factors. The following section will look at how employees grapple with adapting to the new normal and virtuality.

##### The Imbalance of Domestic Relations and Home Office

The imbalance of domestic relations and home office affects the need to be at the office. An individual shares that he prefers to be at the office to have a distinctive, even physical, separation between work and private life. He perceives the home office as a *prison cell* and has difficulties grappling home office with his partner. This concern was shared with his leader, leading him to be permanently at the office,

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“(…) in the first pandemic situation, I was at home every day because we had to, and that worked kind of well, but I always missed going to some - I think it’s the physical aspects of going to another place. Like if you sit in the same room for 12 hours, it’s going to be like a prison cell for me, even though you have a nice home. And I do but it’s still going to be like sort of a prison, I think, or it feels like, claustrophobic. So, I needed a place to go to.”

We find that describing a home office as a prison cell is compelling as we perceive his home office to be somewhat unbearable. Such vivid description seems to be based on his partner also doing home office, which makes work and private life challenging to balance. Furthermore, the statement below indicates that the physical separation between work and personal life is vital for the individual as home-office is “claustrophobic.” As a result, he worked at the office daily and went home to his partner to ensure balance and harmony. The story below illustrates his imbalance and challenge with his partner also doing home office.

“So, I’m also driving [private partner] mad with some stuff. So, if I’m sitting with a pen, ‘click, click’ being like – [private partner] go insane, and I’ll go insane (...). [Private partner] thinks that I’m very noisy, and I think that [private partner] is kind of uptight sometimes. But so, I mean, just for the sake of both of us, I think it’s important that I had to find a way of getting out of the [home] office. And when you come back, you can also easier share what’s happened to the day. If you’ve been next to each other, you’ve been literally there all the time. Right. So, I think that’s a big part of it which was important to me - and socially also, to talk to other people. I mean, even though you’re close with the person you live with, there’s only so much you could talk about. So, you need some input from the outside world. For me anyway.”

The finding above gives excellent insights on how the more minor things are exaggerated when the partner also does home office. In addition, the physical separation between work and private life boosts the conversation with his partner, which indicated how liberated and energized he feels by being at the office. Also, another individual had to apply to be at the office because his partner was also doing home office, and they had a clashing way of working. On one hand, compared to the individuals above, the common ground is that being younger, and doing home

office with a partner, nudges them to be at the office. On the other hand, the more experienced and older individuals do not see the need to be at the office – their connections between work and private life are seemingly harmonized.

#### 4.2.4 *Higher Barriers to Informal Spontaneous Virtual Interactions*

There seems to be a shift in how the sellers interact virtually compared to physically, and that the barriers to *informal* and *spontaneous* interactions virtually are higher. Overall, we find that the individuals interact formally and informally. Such interactions can be *planned*, *spontaneous*, and *random*. Planned interactions are, for example, scheduled meetings. In comparison, spontaneous interactions are interactions between the individuals, for instance, across their desks, in the hallway, or other physical places, and usually within the team. Random interactions are less systemic and less dependent on where, what, and whom. Individuals refer to casual chitchat before and after physical planned and formal meetings,

“When we meet physically, there is a sliding transition, and you might meet in the hallway and go into the meeting together. After half an hour, then - ‘Okay, should we go down for lunch?’ So, there is kind of a more sliding transition.”

The sliding transitions to casual chitchat at the office are illustrated by this seller when she talks about physical meetings with team members. Moreover, she talks about how such casual chitchat is missing virtually,

“So that exact update with my leader worked very well. However, you log on, use the 30 minutes planned, then you log off. (...) ‘Hi, there we are, we have 30 minutes, let us go ahead and then – ‘Okay, now I am going to go for lunch, goodbye, we’ll talk.’”

She visualizes a strong contrast going from physical to virtual interactions. The informal and spontaneous interactions before, during, and after planned meetings seem important to the sellers in Tech-Org as to how this individual tells her story. This story implies how essential informal chitchat is as it may lead to building interpersonal relations with team members. Additionally, findings indicate that virtual informal, and spontaneous interactions at the workplace are limited when an individual talks about what he misses in virtual interactions,

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“(..) you know, when [colleague] was at the office, you could say, ‘Wow, exciting, who is that - and how are you going to manage that?’ Well, and I can say, ‘Well, I think I’m doing this, A, B, and C’ and [colleague] would say, ‘Well, we have the reference where you can go this road towards it or handle it in this aspect.’”

#### Virtual Tools do Not Aid Spontaneous Interactions

Tech-Org sellers do not seem to have increased the use of virtual tools for informal and spontaneous interactions. The virtual tools that Tech-Org uses most frequently seem to be Slack, Teams, and e-mail which appear to be used based on needs. An individual shares how she experiences using virtual tools, “I feel comfortable with asking [colleague]. And there’s no camera. It’s just Slack, a quick message. So yeah, I do that all the time, and [colleague] does the same with me. So, that’s good.” Another individual states that Slack works well and is easy to use - “one can just send a quick Slack, and everyone has notifications on, so it is easy to get a hold of people.” Such findings indicate that the virtual team members find Slack to be a valuable and easy tool to use when reaching out to colleagues.

The use of virtual tools increased for formal intent, primarily due to physical hamper, whereas Slack became one of the primary communication platforms. However, individuals refer to Slack as a tool built for swift messages, which makes us question how Slack can cultivate deeper interpersonal relations between the team members. Additionally, Slack is used to get information or get help from others in the team, not necessarily just to be social. We referred to spontaneous interactions as a way for individuals to get to know each other physically and that it seems to be easy to reach out to colleagues that sit across the desk or in the same office. However, such spontaneous interactions in a virtual setting do not seem as effortless.

#### Spontaneous Informal Interactions Mainly with an Intent

The individuals seem to reach out spontaneously if there is something they need. Otherwise, they reach out less, an interesting difference to physical interactions. The spontaneous informal interactions about everyday matters that happen physically seem nonexistent virtually or not to the same degree. However, an individual shares that she spreads her communication to more people virtually

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compared to physically. Also, she forgets virtual colleagues when she is at the office,

“I feel that if you are at the office and spends time with those at the office, then you kind of forget those who are not there. If we are one or two, then it is natural to have contact over Slack and Teams and whatnot, and more, but if we are more than a couple at the office, then the consequence is that we relate to those people. You ask them questions and relate to them, and I am starting to notice that myself. On the days that I sit at the home office, I spread my communication more to several people in the team. While, if I am at the office, I relate to the regulars - the to-three regulars who are there.”

Surprisingly, those who are physically at the office seem to forget those who work remotely. If we look back to how individuals insinuate that they primarily contact team members with intent, and if several of the team members would be at the office, the few that work virtually can be neglected if they are unintentionally *forgotten*. Another individual alludes to the notion of intent from another angle,

“I think that’s something that you don’t get in a virtual setting; you don’t call people up to tell them something simple, but if you were in a physical environment, they’re going to notice it. There’s a lot of small key aspects of everyday work that you don’t get in a virtual because when you do a virtual meeting, people have put time off for it. So, it’s very formal.”

He explains that he would not call someone spontaneously from the home office about something straightforward, for example, if a client had something positive to relay. This statement supports our argument that it appears to be a higher threshold of talking to team members without intent. When it feels formal, such as sending an e-mail or inviting someone for a chat, it seems harder to do virtually,

“It takes a longer time because if you send it on Slack, then you have to write long messages because one has to explain things and so on, while it is easier to get the point across if one can use the whole body with body language, tone of voice – all of it, right. So, in that sense, it is a difference, but it is also possible to call if that is what it takes to get the point across.”

The spontaneous formal or informal interactions that you would have at the office are uncomplicated, while virtually, it is more strenuous and, as he proposes, different. Also, he refers to the hardship of using virtual tools that do not entail

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calling or video conversations, such as Slack chats. We put forward that the complication might be due to the lack of cues virtually, as individuals unconsciously pick up physically.

#### Challenging to Ask for “Five Minutes” Virtually

“So, it is so much easier to go into the office of someone new and have a chat. I did that with a new one that suddenly sat in an office. It was really friendly, even though [colleague] sat there with a suit and whatnot. [Colleague] had all these cool interests, but if I would be virtual and heard about someone, then [colleague] would just be a floating person. When one sees people physically, you can ask them questions because you have a face to relate to.”

In the physical office, individuals discuss matters across the desk or in the hallways or spontaneously walk over to a person to interact with a formal or informal purpose because they have a “face to relate to.” In virtuality, we find that the individuals reach out to others to a lower degree. It requires familiarities with them and knowledge about whether they are, for instance, available or even sitting by their computer.

The symbolic *five minutes* that one might ask for in the physical office seems less attainable in virtuality,

“It’s always better to meet in person, I think. So, I would prefer that. I would prefer to be able to knock on a door or window, or wherever [colleague] sat and said, ‘do you have five minutes to talk?’ I’d rather do that than sending [colleague] a message on Slack or sending [colleague] - or forward an e-mail saying ‘FYI.’ I mean, that’s a less good alternative, but that’s how it is.”

She speaks about asking colleagues for five minutes virtually as a lesser alternative than asking them physically. Additionally, we find that the *door* or *window* illustrates a physical presence, hence, cues of availability, from the person she is approaching. We propose that because people are less eager to reach out to others virtually, virtuality exaggerates interpersonal distance and constructs barriers to informal and spontaneous interactions. This aspect is supported by, “I think that is very difficult because you get pulled in both directions, but I think it is very important to focus on the little five minutes conversation during the day with each

colleague or team member; that's important." She implies that the five minutes are crucial but challenging virtually.

### The Coffee Machine is Essential to Foster Interpersonal Relations

The *coffee machine* appears to symbolize a physical climate, where the random chitchat about everyday matters occurs. The climate seems to foster informal and formal interpersonal relations. One individual speaks about the importance of the small coffee chat,

"I notice, in particular, that those who are at the office, they build a good culture. It will not be the same when you sit on Teams. One should not underestimate the little coffee chat or the talk on the morning when you get to work."

A leader refers to the same climate as allowing for "(...) the normal chit[chat] that you would have next to the coffee machine if you were at work." These findings indicate that the absence of the coffee machine impacts the individuals and their working environment, as it allows them to talk randomly with different people.

An individual states that the coffee machine opens up for formal discussions as she shares a critical concern with her leader over a cup of coffee,

"We have to evolve constantly and pay attention to what goes on in the business that we are in. I do not believe that we have the capacity to do that at the moment, so I stated my concern to [leader] over a good cup of coffee in the kitchen. So now [leader] knows. I am going to follow up on that."

In this situation, the coffee machine enabled space and time because both individuals found themselves there simultaneously. The conversation was unplanned and unintentional, but good fortune played its part as she shared her concern.

Despite the coffee machine being a climate for random interactions and that individuals refer to the coffee machine as essential, findings suggest that random interactions are challenging to prioritize in a virtual setting. An individual shares that when the workload gets higher, the threshold to log in and grab a random and informal virtual coffee with someone is troubling,

"There are still quite a few colleagues that I do not really know. (...) I imagined when I started that I would spend time with everyone and have



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like a digital coffee and - but then, I mean, the workload started to show up.”

Perhaps, as this individual is new at the company, reaching randomly out to individuals she has never met physically might be challenging. She refers to team members she has not come across virtually in formal settings to be tougher to contact randomly and informally. The physical coffee machine might have been a climate where she could get to know colleagues; however, she has no easy or natural platform without that physical climate. Some individuals talk about attempts to create a virtual coffee machine,

“Like last year we have the coffee machine project, (...) So, if we could have started this coffee machine again, more people will go to the virtual Friday afternoon after work. Everyone is just having their own lives actually now, so we’re more separate for the moment.”

Due to separation and individuals living their own lives, a virtual coffee machine is no longer something Tech-Org does. This separation can be linked back to how virtuality exaggerates individualization. Further, implying that the virtual coffee machine does not seem to reap the same benefits, such as fostering interpersonal relations, as the physical coffee machine allows for.

#### Asking for Immediate Help in a Virtual Setting is Complicated

A leader speaks about a level of frustration when asking for help virtually. She describes the *coffee machine* as a crucial climate for asking for help and coordinating with multiple individuals and their calendars, which is less accessible virtual, “Most of it happens next to the coffee machine, you know, so when you lose that, it’s kind of frustrating.” An employee finds that asking for help is not a problem, but virtuality makes it complicated because she needs to plan time with the leader,

“Yes and no, because as a leader, you are very busy. As my leader is not at the office every day, it is not always so easy to find the time. So, you have to book the leader a couple of days ahead, and that is not always enough because I need help ‘now.’ It is now that I have these issues. It won’t help me to book you in for next week.”

The complexity of asking for help virtually can be linked to the nuisance of distance and lack of cues that the individuals have physically. Therefore, virtuality making it harder to book time and ask for help and “five minutes.” When the individual says, “I need help now,” she suggests that immediate help is complicated to get virtually.

Nevertheless, individuals describe the culture as “really helpful” and that “everyone wants the best for everyone,” thus implying a climate for helping and being unguarded concerning the team. An employee shares an opposing view on asking for help virtually, and that he finds that colleagues instantaneously reply to questions and give time,

“I think maybe the help is more nearby when it’s virtual than if it’s physical, (...) if someone writes something, ‘Can you please help me? Can I call you in five minutes or so?’ They are almost immediately responding. Even though if I can see that they’re in a meeting, I’m like, ‘What are you doing? Why are you - I mean, you don’t need to answer right away, you know?’ So, I think maybe it’s this urge to just, you know ‘Someone contacted me. I need to answer right away, so they know that I’ve seen you. I’ve listened.’ I’m just like, okay, whenever you have time. I feel my team it’s very, very quick to answer. In a physical setting, maybe if I ask someone, ‘can you please help me with this?’ They would be like, ‘I’m in a meeting,’ or ‘I’m on my way into a meeting right now or maybe tomorrow after two o’clock or whatever.’ So, I think maybe the virtual thing is - they’re on, they’re online.”

Despite a higher threshold to ask for help or time from colleagues virtually, individuals find that when they ask for help or time, reactions are quick and almost *too immediate*. “It’s this urge to just” answer because you have been contacted by someone, which seems more challenging to ignore virtually. Moreover, he compares it to physically, as you would not reach out to someone for help if they are walking away for a meeting. Cues such as seeing that someone is walking to a meeting are unknown virtually.

The barrier to sharing ideas and concerns is low, “I am usually met with understanding if there is something that I bring up. (...) You can always bring up, call it problems or ideas. The threshold is quite low for that.” This individual speaks

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about an understanding from colleagues when conveying ideas and concerns, which indicates an open and harmless climate. Although this individual spends time physically at the office, we must acknowledge that the physical interactions may color his point of view.

#### Detrimental Effect of Not Seeing Team Members

A significant finding is that leaders urge the use of the camera to *see* colleagues' faces as they would physically. A leader shares that she had to teach the team how to do virtual meetings by explaining the importance of turning on the camera and wear similar clothes as you would in physical meetings,

“So, that is what comes to mind, it’s like, you know, it’s been a huge challenge. We had to send out some guides on how to do virtual meetings back to basic. So, turn on your camera, put on your shirts, you know, bring your coffee cup, stuff like that. We were not used to it.”

This story hints at her and her teams' novelty in the virtual setting. The guide testifies to the organizations' and teams' need to learn how to communicate and have meetings virtually. Another leader shares, “We have, not a requirement, but it goes without saying that everyone has their camera on. So, we at least can see each other.” She insinuates how essential it is to “see each other” virtually because it relays a connection between the participants.

“We do have a fully digital working environment; we have Slack as a communication tool where we can communicate quickly and simply. It is more personal than to fiddle with mail threads to each other. (...) we can see each other. We can talk to each other. We can see facial expressions and movement patterns. What we say is just seven percent of communication; I think that 45% is body language and the rest is the voice. Like there is a lot one misses if we just use video.”

This individual proposes that the camera does not seem to make up for physical expressions. The previous leaders mention how they urge the use of the camera to see the team and for the team to see each other. Despite that, as the last individual alludes to, “there is a lot one misses if we just use video,” referring to features such as body language that may be tough to show on video. Another leader has similar references, “Just to see people. To see people’s legs, obviously. Just to see people. The whole people.” He speaks about the possibility of seeing people in real life, not

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virtually, which allows for reading body language and further understand who the team members are outside of the camera. A leader shares,

“When you were able to see a person’s physical or facial reactions - let’s say you’re having a really serious conversation with an employee as a manager, having that conversation where you’re going to raise a concern regarding your approach. We should adjust. We should do like this, or we’re getting complaints about this. There have been some of those situations - having that conversation sitting, staring at yourself, not knowing whether this person is listening. Is this person smiling? Is this person crying? You can’t catch these signs and just physical body language and the facial expressions that can steer your conversation in a different way. I would not continue being so harsh with you if I saw that you were sitting there and actually crying, I would not do that.”

The leader expresses her concern about adapting to her team members without seeing their reactions virtually. She implies that losing the ability to see the other in a virtual meeting is detrimental to the conversation. The leader refers to physical reactions to a conversation or knowing how a person feels as vital to the interaction. An individual finds that inability to see team members affect flow to interactions,

“(…) in a meeting with until 15 people, there should be a rule that everyone has their camera on. This is because it becomes much more alive than if you only see [initials] on the screen. The others don’t know if I am in bed sleeping or if I actually pay attention, or I’m on my phone or watching TV. So, absolutely, I feel that it is important for the dynamic.”

The notion that others in virtual meetings are not paying attention seems to cause detachment and decrease motivation. In physical interactions, individuals look at the people they talk to, making sure that they understand or acknowledge,

“It gets kind of lost with Teams. It requires more to keep the motivation going. Also, I think that when we have those large Teams-meetings, I see that people have their pictures up and that most people turn off their camera after a while. I believe that they are doing something else, like with their phone. It is a scary trend just that. [Colleague] looks at [colleagues] watch because there is a notification, and e-mail and then there is something on Slack.”

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Individuals appear to disengage in virtual meetings. You cannot “turn off the camera in a physical meeting,” which could indirectly mean leaving the meeting. This statement is another take on the leaders’ urge to ask team members to have their camera on persistently; otherwise, situations such as “others don’t know if I am in bed sleeping” might occur, influencing the teams’ engagement.

#### Fraction Delay’s Negative Influence on Participation

Multiple individuals have referred to what is called a *fraction delay*, which means that there is a second delay from when one person speaks to the other hear it. Such a delay often makes people talk simultaneously, especially in social and informal gatherings with no set order of people talking. An individual shares a concern, “it’s not the same dynamics and flow when it’s virtual in my experience.” It is important to note that concerns with fraction delays are mainly in social settings. Findings show that it is more of a set order in formal virtual meetings, which means that people often know whose turn to talk. Virtual interactions flow better due to agendas in formal meetings,

“It seems phony or plastic-like, and you have to think, okay, whose turn is it to talk now? (...) It’s not going to work because there is a fractured delay. So, when you when I’m talking now, and you guys are listening. Therefore, the conversation is going all right, but when we’re sitting at a physical meeting, there’s going to be a lot more fluid aspect of a conversation.”

This statement indicates that interactions are less appealing virtually due to fraction delay. Another individual shares that virtual meetings are “staccato and monotone.” She states, “one does not participate as much as you would if you sit in a room together, see each other and see each other’s body language.” She hints that virtuality limits participation. Nevertheless, there seems to be a significant level of unpretentiousness between the team members despite fraction delay.

The findings imply that virtuality constitutes a hurdle for spontaneous interactions. Further discoveries suggest lower spontaneous and informal interactions virtually because individuals do not reach out to others without intent. Additionally, random and informal interactions are lacking virtually. There is a higher threshold to ask for five minutes and help virtually as there are less availability cues. Lastly, the individuals yearn for the coffee machine climate.

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### 4.3 Emerging Changes with Virtuality that Strengthens Psychological Safety

The previous dimension finds emerging changes to be that sellers work individually and that the pandemic and sudden virtuality has increased the distance between the team members. There is a gap between oldtimers and newcomers regarding expressing themselves, and employees grapple with virtuality differently due to domestic relations, age and experience. Furthermore, informal and spontaneous interactions appear to be complicated virtually. The emerging changes in the next dimension are increased scheduled interactions, building interpersonal relations, and responding to failure.

#### 4.3.1 *Increased Scheduled Interactions to Boost Informal Virtual Interactions*

The level of scheduled interactions seems to have increased as Tech-Org went virtual. Leaders mention daily stand-ups, weekly meetings, and one-on-ones with each individual. Most team members attend these meetings virtually while a few joins from the office. Weekly meetings seem to be an occurrence in all of the Scandinavian offices,

“So, we have weekly meetings every Monday, Monday morning. We gather in Teams, and we talk to each other for about an hour and try to discuss different topics, try to talk about competitors and - I don’t know - how to move forward, to try to help one another.”

A similarity with all the weekly meetings appears to be the intention to gather the team to create a team feeling and belongingness, despite the virtual setting. As the individual says, “try to help one another,” she suggests that the weekly meetings empower the team to ask for help. Further, that regular touchpoint may frame a safe climate to talk, which may positively impact the team. A leader saw the need to ensure that the employees got up and dressed for the day to sort of prompt them to start the day in a certain way, hinting at a stressful and challenging situation,

“So, we had to take some rounds to find alternative solutions; digital meetings were set, fixed digital meetings, of course, such as Monday meetings every single Monday, Tuesday meetings, every single Tuesday for reporting and stuff, but most of all, we were handling cooperating with each

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other through something I called stand-up's every single morning to make people, you know, start the day in a good way, get up and dress up. Even though you're working from home, it does something with your mental state."

Regardless of the leader's attempt, an individual shares, "As you can see me, you can see my hair today. I didn't even care to do anything about it." She suggests that virtuality has made her less focused on her appearance and how others view her. Such findings imply that the individuals are influenced by virtuality, and as the leader proposes, virtuality does something with "your mental state." An individual shares how he feels somewhat connected to and recognizes his colleagues when they are themselves virtually as they would physically,

"We have one team member who has very contentious energy, so it's kind of funny, and this team member always does goofy things, dropping the computer or dropping a cup of coffee or something like that. So, it's just funny. It creates, again, this feeling of – I don't know if I would say belonging in the team. It's like, 'I knew you would do that because that's so you, that's so your personality.' So, it kind of brings us together in the different roles that we play."

Another individual says, "You also see people's children because they are coming in and so on. It just engaged more to the person." These stories demonstrate how individuals experience familiarities with team members virtually. However, the informality that familiarities may allow for is insufficient in a virtual setting. Therefore, leaders have scheduled social interactions in formal planned meetings with the team.

#### The Necessity to Schedule Social Interactions in Formal Meetings

Leaders have set aside time to be social together as a team in the weekly meetings, which indicates a necessity to spend time together informally,

"Well, right now, we have a meeting every week, Friday afternoon. Where we talk about - it is partly social and partly KPI-oriented towards the budget. So, you ask, 'how is the week been? Have people had good meetings? Are there great feedbacks?', and that sort of thing."

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It is found that spontaneous informal interactions are complicated virtually due to a lack of availability cues, which explains why leaders have found it vital to plan for social interactions in formal meetings. However, the question, “Have people had good meetings?” has a formal and work-related tone, which we propose may negatively affect the intention for social interactions in meetings.

The 15-20 minutes in the beginning of the weekly meetings are scheduled to *check-in* before starting with the formal agenda. The initiative of the check-in implies that the employees miss the daily social interactions in the physical climate and, therefore, need to prioritize informal interaction in the formal virtual meetings,

“We try to spend 15-20 minutes in the start, to just check-in, ‘how are everyone?’ and then go to business. We did not do this as much physically, but it is getting more and more important now that we cannot see each other as we don’t have the coffee machine, talk of getting a coffee together or eating lunch together. It is not the same, but it has gotten more important.”

The start of the virtual formal meetings is constructed to be similar to the natural transitions from casual chitchat in the hallway before a meeting; thus, the “15-20 minutes” attempt to simulate such physical informal interactions. Insights show that by checking in, the team members can respond to other team members’ narratives about, for instance, the weekend in a positive matter. An emoji *clap* or *hearth* in Teams is a virtual reaction. The team members can see a colleague’s smile or other facial expressions and other responses with the camera on. In addition, fraction delay does not seem as troublesome in planned social interactions, such as check-ins, compared to solely social virtual interactions. In the check-in, the individuals take turns speaking. Insights also show that a clear majority of the team members have their cameras on throughout the meeting, which seems positive to build interpersonal relations.

Virtual social activities seem to be challenging. However, a leader states that this is something they should do. She adds, “although it is harder to have it virtually, it is not the same thing.” On one hand, leaders mention that the teams’ request has been to have social activities together physically, when possible, hence, after the pandemic and home office order. On the other hand, a leader shares that social activities virtually with just the team are something they should do to see each other more informally. By spending time together outside of work virtually, team



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members build interpersonal relations. The following individual talks about why social activities are critical for the team,

“Due to the high ceiling that everyone speaks about, you get to know each other well, and everyone is concerned with being social outside of work. Moreover, interested in doing things together, getting to know each other well, and gaining trust with another. Not just as colleagues, but also as friends, I believe that is important.”

### Phony Socialization

Spending time together in a virtual social climate seems strenuous to many. For instance, “I don’t like to be very social virtually. I think it’s a bit - it’s very corny, and it just doesn’t give me the same feel as talking to people.” Moreover, he refers to purely social interactions virtually, and how he finds such interactions phony,

“it’s a constructed sort of reality that people would never sit and look at each other like that in real life. It seems phony or plastic-like, and you have to think, ‘okay, whose turn is it to talk now?’ Yeah, you can share memes, and you can share gifs and stuff like that, but it’s still weird. It’s still weird to - like people who talk at the same time.”

Socialization virtually, such as “Friday bars,” require people to sit in front of the screen and talk, drink or do other activities together. Such virtual activities are considered bizarre because they are a constructed reality, recognized as phony socialization. In a physical setting, individuals would move around a room and talk to different individuals, while in a virtual setting, they cannot usually *walk around*. Only one person can speak at a time virtually, which imposes the rest to listen. However, there are possibilities with technology that allows for walking around and visiting different virtual rooms where you can converse with a few chosen individuals,

“I don’t know what it was called, but it kind of looked like a game. So, you actually have, like, your little character, and you walked into like a dining room or the living room, and then you could sit next to each other. So, you kind of could see who was where. You walked with your character, and you could sit down.”

The virtual “after works” has been mentioned by several individuals with various levels of favorability. Those who find virtual socialization less favorable seem to be those who prioritize private commitments. On one hand, these individuals do not mention whether they attended more when it was physical. On the other hand, if we look at previous sections and balancing domestic relations and work, it might be easier to separate the work and private life if socialization was in a physical setting.

“We try to do that - we have like virtual after works and virtual drinks, and I think that it’s a bit weird to drink with a camera. I have a [private commitment] as well. So, I don’t have time for that. So, we try our best, but I’m not sure it works that good.”

Fraction delays, balancing homelife virtually, and the virtual setting seem to be troubling to the individuals. People generally have spontaneous interactions in physical, social events, for example, replying to statements or smiling, which seem more brutal virtually. Lastly, social interactions appear fake, thus, unattractive.

#### *4.3.2 Building Interpersonal Relations*

The pandemic and sudden virtuality have changed how the team members interact, whereas findings indicate that it is necessary to establish needs to regulate for unfavorable changes. The findings suggest that virtuality limits building interpersonal relations, thus, culture being an indicator for understanding the meaning of interactions.

##### A Culture with High Ceiling, Humor, and Bantering

Scandinavians believe in egalitarian principles where organizations seem to appreciate directness (Warner-Søderholm, 2012). These principles are evident in our findings, primarily referring to the directness as a *high ceiling*. Moreover, the principles seem to allow for low power distance and perhaps a reasonably open culture. Findings suggest that Tech-Org’s employees find it easier to ask colleagues and leaders for help physically. As mentioned in the previous dimension, there is a difference in how the individuals express themselves and how they approach colleagues, based on age and experience. These differences are essential to consider concerning the high ceiling and an egalitarian structure, as the findings in this section elucidate. When asked about culture, an individual share,

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“It is indeed a cliché that one says that it is a very high ceiling within a team, but I experience that it truly isn’t. One can notify each other if something has gone well, and also give constructive criticism to each other if there is potential for improvement.”

The individual illustrates openness and a high ceiling within her team by stating that everyone can give feedback, good and bad. Although a high ceiling is a cliché, one can give each other compliments and constructive criticism without hinders. When another individual was asked about culture, she mentions the low power distance – “it’s not all organizations where you can just contact the manager saying ‘Hey, what is this? Can I fix this? We have to do this.’” Moreover, she explains how a high ceiling adds to a great culture,

“The ceiling is very high, and you can talk to anyone, and you can just reach out if you have any questions. Even though I get annoyed, sometimes people feel like they can also just call me up. ‘Hey, what’s going on?’ So that’s probably a good receipt that we actually have a good culture. We probably created something good.”

Openness and egalitarian principles forge the opportunity to say whatever comes to mind. An individual mentions that she experiences high levels of trust and that people know each other quite well. The previous stories reflect that high ceiling and low power distance are well-integrated in the team’s culture.

Again, an individual says that the culture is “good,” and the team members are a good match. He adds that he enjoys that there is a “meldekultur” or *culture for speaking up*. At the same time, colleagues are happy for each other, “there are never any cranky faces when someone does well or jealousy or stuff like that.” He further describes there are not many filters in such culture – “you call a spade for a spade.” He says that some team members speak up or comment more than others, but they have social skills and adapt to the team members. Unaware of the specifics, such comments indicate that *bantering* is a part of the team’s culture. A great example of bantering is when we asked an individual if everyone participates equally in the monthly meetings. She says that she is always super quiet, “I never say anything.” Further, the individual shares,

“I had a meeting yesterday with a colleague of mine who said that “Wow, I’ve never heard you talk [name of individual], and we’ve been in like ten

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meetings together. (...) [colleague] has always talked English and tells the whole complex system (...), and I told [colleague], I said “Wow [colleague], I didn’t know you could speak [language B], and [colleague] said like “oh, I didn’t know you could speak.” So again, I got a bit offended, like what do you mean, but then I realized that that’s probably the way some people see me, even though I would describe myself as very outgoing and very talkative.”

The story enhances our suggestion that high ceiling and bantering are a considerable part of the culture and reflect the individuals themselves. Moreover, the individual seems to express herself virtually when talking to a colleague, however, less expressive in larger virtual meetings. In addition, humor in all seriousness seems to be valuable for the team members. An individual says, “since there is to the extent a high ceiling and that there is somewhat culture for speaking up, it is easier to be oneself.” This finding indicates that speaking up is a part of his identity where the culture allows him to be himself.

#### Heart-to-Heart and One-on-One

Since interactions on a team level are essential, it is also crucial to look at the *leader-member* relationship. The leaders’ initiatives on *heart-to-hearts* and *one-on-ones* with the team members are critical. Both leaders and team members mention the need for such conversation under the pandemic and uncertainty. A leader shares,

“(...) having that heart-to-heart conversation with the team as their manager, hearing the thoughts that made them open up a lot more and then be able to shift focus to, you know, fields of business that were not as targeted by the pandemic. Their business was business as usual within IT, within these kinds of things like then we shifted our focus to that to be able to keep the numbers up.”

A leader from another office shares that she has one-on-ones with everyone. The questions were usually how the weekend, last week, and this week have been. She says that team members can decide how much they want to share and adds that it is usually quite open, which they somewhat need. Further, she shares, “especially in this situation, where we do not meet, then it is harder to catch such cases.” This story indicates how the leader acknowledges the pandemic and how she values individual consideration during uncertain times. Moreover, when the leader says,

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“such cases,” it implies that she refers to challenges the individuals might not share without the one-on-ones. Therefore, heart-to-hearts and one-on-ones indicate that the leaders take responsibility and strive to build interpersonal relations virtually.

The stories above indicate how leaders initiate deeper conversations with the team members on an individual level. However, it is complementary to look at such conversations from a team member’s point of view. As mentioned earlier, several individuals share struggles they have under the pandemic and uncertainty. A team member experienced many frustrations and asked his leader to have a heart-to-heart “to let off steam and talk about different things.” The leader then called him to talk about his challenges and concerns,

“I think it was more than an hour where we talked and discussed. [Leader] was listening and being very proud and appreciated that I shared my thoughts on this, but also wanted to remind me that I also need to work on my own mental state of mind. I forgot the question again; I just talk, but that was one example of me directly contacting [leader] to share both failure and success and having a heart-to-heart with [leader].”

The story above hints at how a leader responds when a team member approaches by being proud and listening, which reflected the leader’s availability under uncertain times. Unaware of the specifics in the conversation, there was a need to have a heart-to-heart with his leader. Other individuals also share stories of the need to talk with their leader; for instance, individuals share that they had to be at the office for personal reasons. The leader then adapted and realized the needs the individuals had. Compared with the story above on heart-to-heart conversation with his leader, there was no clear intention for the one-on-ones, rather a monthly routine. She says,

“My leader and I talk together. We talk about what we need, what do you need from me to make your working easier, what do you need to sort of achieve your goals, where do you see yourself in six months. You can also through ball about ideas (...) I feel that my ideas are taken seriously. If there are any concerns or something one wish to brings up or change, they get written down straight away, and [we] actually get updates on the case, which I believe is great.”

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This individual mentions one-on-ones where they set expectations on each other. Additionally, she shares that the last one-on-one session was virtual. Although the frequency and the urgency are different, there seems to be no hindering in approaching the leaders when initiating heart-to-hearts or one-on-ones.

#### Digital Appreciation through Memes and Emojis

One of the individuals shares about his success and how he appreciates feedback and acknowledgment from his leader virtually,

“When we had this sales meeting last Friday, we’re talking about what we’re going to commit and what [leader] is saying ‘Well, great done with the sales.’ That feedback gives me more of a trust in myself and all the results that I’m delivering. I think that’s a great success story, that you can talk to your manager on regular basis. That [leader] is saying, just keep pushing. It is going in the right direction and that sort of thing.”

Although the section above does not emphasize heart-to-heart conversations and one-on-ones done *virtually*, this section has explicitly covered how the team members get *digital appreciation*. A leader uses the term digital appreciation as an essential part of everyday life,

“Just try to not limit yourself when it comes to digital appreciation because, okay, we cannot really see each other by the coffee machine and tell each other, ‘Oh, I saw what you did there. You’re doing great.’ I just feel like, okay, taking that step, being a little bit forward, obviously, and that’s kind of the knack for that, but just reaching out and try to lift each other up, even digitally, that is one way of celebrating.”

The leader proposes that despite virtuality, one should not restrict oneself in communicating appreciation. By digital appreciation, the individuals can “lift each other up, even digitally.” He suggests that even though the typical acknowledgments such as physical high fives are impossible, it is possible to appreciate each other virtually,

“We can be a little bit, yeah, we can go a little bit crazy. It’s no worries. Externally, super professional, internally. We can just be who we are because we try to celebrate like that and celebrate each other on Slack, and you know, call each other when we’re in Teams.”

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On one hand, virtuality appears to create a distance between the individuals as they “cannot really see each other by the coffee machine.” Furthermore, virtuality seems to limit the chance to give direct and random feedback to people face-to-face. On the other hand, there are possibilities with virtuality as this individual presents,

“That being said, we are now sometimes writing a little sentence that – ‘Yay, I just booked that meeting,’ everything is turning, with a lot of emojis and smileys and so on. So, it’s a more positive context, and it’s just a small thing, but it actually works. So, I’ve been doing that myself. Again, the feeling of not being alone, because if the case were that I was at the office with my team members around me, I would just say it out loud. ‘Yay, something I want to tell you,’ I want to get some recognition for this. So that’s what it creates that I’m writing at someone. I know someone is on the other side just listening and say, ‘yeah, good job’ because we are salespeople, we need a lot of recognition. So, it’s a positive thing.”

He illustrates that “emojis and smileys” are a way to respond to comments and posts in Slack, and that such small responds work. Although using emojis, such as thumbs up and smileys, or commenting on someone’s post seemingly have a positive influence, the individual emphasizes that salespeople need much appreciation for their work.

### Virtual Celebrations Replacing the Physical Bell

Before the pandemic, a physical bell was used to show appreciation and give positive feedback for success. That being said, we asked the individuals if there are any *bells* that are equivalent to the physical ones. A leader shares how he experiences the change in success and celebration,

“I think it’s whenever we are in office. It’s much easier to share these successes. Right now, we just share successes on Slack. It’s just – ‘I got a customer, yay.’ In the office, we have this bell - just ringing the bell. It’s different that way; you more have success, the more you are happy, you are more engaged to every success for yourself and your colleagues. So, it’s very difficult. I almost forgot how it was before. (...) We are good to celebrate things and have Friday afternoon meetings with wine after working hour and so on, but now everything is closed down, and we miss this a lot. So, there are not that many success stories to tell for the moment.”

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He indicates that success and celebrating wins are a large part of the seller's role. The male leader mentions a physical bell that they would use to celebrate wins, and now that Tech-Org works virtually, this bell has "moved" to Slack. Further, he speaks about how success is a driver for happiness on the individual and collective level, and celebration is connected to after-work drinks with colleagues. As the leader suggests that celebrations are closely connected to happiness, it is interesting to look closer at the shift to virtual celebrations. The previous dimension referred to sales individuals being concerned with winning, and as the sales are down, there is less to celebrate. An employee talks about how the team tries to celebrate together by giving applause and "ring the bell and like 'Whoopee!'" He speaks about not being a fan of the bell, "but it is important to celebrate wins too."

"It helps for the togetherness I have in the team because some like it, well, many like it better than me, though. It is kind of via Slack, this internal channel for all of [Tech-Org]. It is a group called [Slack channel name] that one publishes when there is a new client. Call it a virtual bell if you like, but it is better to write there than to go physically to the bell. I like that better."

He refers to the virtual bell as a positive change from the physical bell as he finds it uncomfortable to celebrate himself. The virtual interactions that build interpersonal relations, such as the virtual bell, go across Tech-Org offices.

However, individuals also refer to posting on Slack as not being comparable to physical celebrations. For instance, "there is no celebration, that I can say. Or what I can say is - we post it on Slack when it is done, so in that sense, you can say that it is celebrated." He goes on to explain that celebration should not happen every time there is a new client, "If we celebrate something, it should be something special, not like a routine if you know what I mean. Then the point of celebrations disappears." Celebrating good actions or wins on Slack boosts culture and makes employees feel as if they are a part of something positive. Nonetheless, the individuals have different opinions on virtual celebrations. As a result, celebrations are critical for building interpersonal relations, especially as virtuality seems to create a distance between the team members.

#### 4.3.3 *Responding to Failure*

An individual explains how the saying *smooth ride* is a cultural thing - "I feel like the culture here really allows you to kind of express yourself, be yourself, not adapt



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yourself in a way that would harm your personality or your work efforts or whatever it might be,” which affirms our findings on how some individuals are able to express themselves in Tech-Org. In this case, expressing themselves is more regarding the culture. The individual above mentions the “smooth ride” when asked stories of success or failures,

“I mean, it depends - on what I call a failure is when I’m not really reaching the levels that I want to. A lot of times, it’s because of the factors that are outside of my control, but for me, it’s more of a failure when we don’t reach the highest level of potential we could have reached within that sequence. I would say that is a failure, I suppose, at least here in [Tech-Org], but it’s been a smooth ride.”

The finding implies that failure in Tech-Org does not harm your personality or your work efforts. Furthermore, this could also be applied to expressing yourself. He adds, “I do really, really, really think that the culture is the key here at [Tech-Org] when it comes to failures.”

“I’d definitely say that like being comfortable with the culture that really put some security in, like in your back, so to speak. Okay, I can fail, and people will help me out, and people won’t throw me under the bus, and people won’t be mad at me. Okay, maybe that will be if I mess up super badly, but I tend not to do that because obviously, we all want to succeed and do our best. But I do feel like the culture here allows - I trust you. I trust that you can do a good work. Okay, you didn’t really do super well this time, but I know that you’re going to do better next time. (...) I do feel like [trust] is the biggest part of my own journey at [Tech-Org].”

#### The Fear of Failure as a Seller

We get the impression that failure often happens as a seller, especially when an individual says, “I mean, I work in sales, as you know, so in sales, you fail a lot, and those who say they don’t, they lie.” Furthermore, the culture and colleagues seem to not use it against you. It seems like it is supposed to be about the *people*.

However, an individual shares the cruciality in taking care of one another rather than the client when one cannot close the deal. He explains how it is easy to storm out to make the client happy, then the one that has gotten the negative feedback gets in a squeeze. The individual adds that people tend to forget the colleague. Such

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actions imply that the seller role and the competitive culture make employees eager to win cases, perhaps, at the expense of their colleagues. That being said, we do not have much data on this.

#### No “Pink Skies” and the Need to Talk About Failure

An employee mentions the learning process that comes after the failure has occurred. He refers to the current situation as problematic and that it can be “very frustrating if you only want to talk about the pink skies when it’s not pink.” Such *pink skies* are referred to as times when sales are good, and the individual finds it challenging to not talk about how hard it is when sales are down. He adds, “we need to talk about also the very good things, but for a couple of us, it was very important to talk more about the failures because that’s a thing that we can learn from each other.” Another individual also shares the importance of learning from failure and moving on,

“Obviously, I wanted to win, but we didn’t. So, then I have to move on, and I can’t pay much attention to that, but I think that when we have a good structure for and also good discussions to kind of learn from, ‘okay, so why didn’t that work out then? What do we need to do differently?’ I think that everyone is interested in learning and how can we and what can we learn from this and how can we do differently next time? That’s an environment which is really healthy and also good for everyone. So, I haven’t, I mean, any real failures. I think it’s more like what you learn from it, and how can you move forward.”

Furthermore, with the pandemic and the uncertainty, tackling failures might be challenging. An individual mentions that the team has faced a hard time in the pandemic. The employees got frustrated with the situation, and the companies are being “very let’s see how the pandemic” evolves. Due to the frustrations and “feeling kind of blue,” the leader took the initiative to gather the team to talk about the struggles. They discussed questions like “what can we do to pick ourselves up and what is the market situation and so on, so forth.” He adds, “people are people. So, of course, it helped because we got together and saw each other physically and talked about why we are not delivering the results right now. So, that was the direct result of failure.” This story indicates that the pandemic and the uncertainty increase the concerns for failures as external factors affect individual deliveries.

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The leader above took the initiative as he saw the need to gather the team and talk about the uncertainty, thus, responded to failure and seemingly created a climate for the employees to express themselves. The leaders appear to respond to the severity of the pandemic and sudden virtuality differently, such as the leader mentioned above who gathered the team to talk. In contrast, another leader appears to shift focus under uncertainty.

## **5 Discussion**

### **5.1 Asking for Help Due to Reactive Changes and Implementing Proactive Changes**

Multiple individuals have been impacted by adapting to a new normal and balancing home office. Finding suggests that the change to virtuality has been strenuous, especially for the individuals who have to balance private commitments and home office. This imbalance seems to affect how the individuals react to virtuality, such as the need to be physically at the office. An individual describes the home office as a “prison cell” and needs to be at the office due to his partner also doing home office. At the same time, another individual has a clashing way of working with his partner. These statements are examples of reactive changes where individuals saw the need for change and asked their leaders for help. Carmeli and his colleagues (2009) find that the ability to ask for help requires PS and solid interpersonal relations, which we propose is essential for the individuals who see the need to ask their leaders for help regarding the home office and the new normal. Moreover, stronger interpersonal relations make it easier for the individuals to express themselves. However, we suggest that the imbalance may challenge the existing PS, which may weaken the units’ overall PS.

The reactive change, such as the emergent imbalance of home office, and proactive change in virtuality, for instance, digital appreciations, have become apparent in our findings. Reactive changes are responses to virtuality that “just happens;” it is not deliberate or planned. In comparison, proactive changes are intentional and planned changes that deal with the pandemic and sudden virtuality. We find the two aspects vital for Tech-Org to understand because the unavoidable repercussions with virtuality may strengthen or weaken PS, which must be dealt with to secure PS. At the same time, recognizing the proactive changes that strengthens PS in

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sudden virtuality. These changes will be elaborated on throughout the discussion to look closer at what strengthens and weakens PS.

## **5.2 Conflict Between a Culture of Teamwork and Individualized Work**

Our findings suggest that the seller role builds on exclusively individualized work. However, the individuals described the culture differently. Some say they help each other and want the best for each other, while others describe the culture as competitive – you are either a star or a loser. For that reason, a culture of teamwork versus the seller role is crucial to discuss to find out what may weaken or strengthen PS.

We believe that the seller role and the expectations on the deliveries and results of a seller motivate the individuals to focus on personal goals rather than teamwork and common goals. The findings indicate that “the more you sell, the more money you make,” creating a drive and incentive to sell as much as possible, regardless of the common goals. Moreover, Kozlowski and Ilgen (2006) argue that teamwork is defined by, among others, common goals, implying that the sellers are not building teamwork, hence, interpersonal relations. When asked about success and shared goals, several individuals seem to emphasize the separation between personal and common goals. Findings imply that the sales leaders define common goals based on personal KPIs, which enhances the drive to achieve personal goals.

Edmondson and Lei (2014) argue that a lack of PS in teams can negatively affect organizational success. In this case, it seems like the term “team” itself is dubious as the individuals work to achieve personal goals, not necessarily the common goals. However, we are unaware of the specific common goals, but it is well-represented that they work individually. Therefore, looking at the individuals as “team members” might be ambiguous, making us suggest the team may just be a formality – it is instead a group of people who have a common description of roles but do not work towards the common goals - “It’s a one-man army.”

Before the pandemic and sudden virtuality, the sellers worked physically together, perhaps in the same building or floor, but not exhibiting interdependences as to how scholars define a team (Kozlowski & Ilgen, 2006). Scholars like Kahn (1990) and Edmondson and Lei (2014) mention that PS can be fostered and nurtured in teams and organizations, making the application of the concept PS in this case

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inappropriate in a virtual setting. However, the individuals socially interact with the use of technology, and they are linked together in a larger system, being Tech-Org (Kozlowski & Ilgen, 2006; Gibson & Cohen, 2003, cited in Martins, 2004), proposing the units can be perceived as teams, thus, making the concept of PS applicable. Nonetheless, an individual shares, “even before Corona, I wasn’t much of a team player.” This statement implies that the work description of the seller role creates individualized work, thus, interpersonal distance, regardless of the sudden virtuality and the pandemic. In other words, teamwork is almost undetectable in the sales teams. Therefore, we argue that the seller role in Tech-Org seems to weaken PS.

Contrary to individualized work is the culture of teamwork. However, this notion seems to be neglected by most individuals, meaning that a few mention interdependencies. Findings imply that the culture is not built on common goals and cooperation, rather the informal and social interactions – as the individual goal is emphasized. High ceiling, bantering and humor, and somewhat familiarities between the individuals seem to be valued and well-integrated in the culture. However, the individuals seem to fail to describe work-related topics. An observation is that the individuals seem to glow when describing the informal interactions and culture. Furthermore, findings show that spontaneous and random interactions are lessened virtually, suggesting a great potential to build a teamwork culture and genuine togetherness. Therefore, by working more explicitly towards common goals, the individuals might experience being in a team, not just individuals with a joint work description. As a result, by being a team, they can build PS according to literature, increasing the possibility to achieve overall success (Kahn, 1990).

Again, the lessened interaction and interdependency seem to have created distance or *silence* between the team members, which may demonstrate a lack of PS (Edmondson, 2018). However, findings show a culture for speaking up in the sales teams, as they call “spade for a spade.” A culture of speaking up strengthens PS. Furthermore, joking, bantering, and strange “signature” habits as the one where an individual drops a cup of coffee, indicates a PS environment as individuals are at ease to express themselves and being who they are, also virtually (Edmondson, 2018).

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Findings suggest that there is a gap between oldtimers and newcomers when it comes to expressing themselves. With time and experience, some individuals are perceived to be confident in approaching team members and leaders, which indicates high levels of PS as some are “comfortable expressing and being themselves” (Edmondson, 2018, p. xvi). In comparison, the newcomers seem to be more aware of how they express themselves and emphasize that it comes with time. Therefore, the gap weakens PS as newcomers should be able to express themselves fully regardless of age and experience. That being said, the gap might be a natural consequence in general; however, findings suggest that perceived insecurity as young and new in Tech-Org limits PS. In other words, age and experience as a seller strengthen an individual’s PS – the more you are psychologically safe, the more you are equipped for individualized work.

In addition, we have found that new employees are prioritized to be at the office two weeks in, which makes us question why two weeks is perceived as adequate. External factors are limiting the number of persons allowed at the office. However, we find it important to discuss the duration and what happens in the two-week onboarding. That being said, we find the physical onboarding to be paradoxical according to our findings and PS literature.

On one hand, since the seller role relies on individualized work and little teamwork, we suggest that Tech-Org train the onboardees to fit in the seller role, thus, train them to work individually. Therefore, we suggest that the seller role is a *set* work description, not necessarily something that has been forged with time or by personal attributes. Concerning the onboarding, “set” in the sense that the sellers are expected and trusted to work individually. As a result, the onboarding with its limited duration weakens the PS in the team, although there is seemingly a high degree of virtual availability from colleagues.

On the other hand, the practicalities of the onboarding are physical, which we have found is more beneficial for the onboardees. There seems to be no silence in the two weeks where the onboarding takes place. The onboardees are provided with the opportunity to grab the chance to ask for help and express themselves during the onboarding process, which suggests a PS climate. However, scholars argue that one can foster inclusion through PS also virtually, not particularly face-to-face (Feitosa & Salas, 2020). Feitosa and Salas (2020) suggest that the sales teams can foster PS also virtually, where in this case, their proposal is neglected after the two weeks

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physical onboarding – the sellers are expected to work individually, so we question if the individuals perhaps see no need to foster inclusion.

Moreover, Edmondson (2018) argues that one does not have to be a leader to foster PS in an organization. One can display interest and availability, which seems evident in our findings, however, just to a certain degree. For instance, the two weeks of onboarding seem exemplary according to literature (Edmondson, 2018) but interest and availability are neglected after the two weeks. That being said, it might be essential to look at if such absence is due to the seller role, the lack of PS, or even perhaps a dimension between the two aspects. Overall, we perceive individualized work to weaken PS, where PS seems to be valued when onboarding. We suggest that the individuals implicitly apply PS to ensure interpersonal distance, which keeps PS from flourishing.

### **5.3 The Need to Speak Up and Heart-to-Hearts**

Since the sellers are expected to work individually, we question if it is also expected that they perform alone and independently. This query elaborates on whether speaking up is appropriate concerning the seller role. Edmondson (2018) argues that if one is safe, one is able to speak up.

Several individuals have mentioned heart-to-hearts and one-on-ones. Such initiatives were evident from both team members and leaders. We perceive that such conversations are forums for individuals to speak up and participate, indicating PS in the teams. Therefore, it might be critical to look at how the individuals initiate such conversation and that the individuals do not feel hindered by interpersonal fear (Edmondson, 2018). By initiating such conversations, PS is strengthened in teams.

It is vital to acknowledge that everyone does not hold back their participation. We found that for some, there had to be a specific problem or concern for realizing heart-to-hearts. That being said, we question if leaders or colleagues portray availability *through* the pandemic and sudden virtuality. Our findings imply that individuals initiated the conversations due to the pandemic, uncertainty, and being a newly hired employee in Tech-Org. The matters seem to be serious, which makes us question if the individuals truly participate, indicating a need to further discuss the motives behind heart-to-hearts. There might be minor concerns, although not less important, that the individuals want to share with their colleagues or leaders, which may not be shared in the monthly one-on-ones or otherwise. In other words,

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an individual's concern might have to be more "serious" and in relevance to the external factors when approaching leaders for heart-to-hearts. Therefore, the seller role combined with the pandemic and sudden virtuality seems to hinder heart-to-hearts, limiting the potential to build PS.

However, findings signalize that the individuals can ask for heart-to-heart with leaders about serious matters. Forums such as one-on-ones may foster PS and lower the threshold to ask for heart-to-hearts. Therefore, the existence of such a proactive initiative builds interpersonal relations and may strengthen PS.

#### **5.4 Cues of Availability Lead to Interactions**

The sales teams used to interact at the office and through virtual tools such as Slack and Teams. The same platforms are present in virtuality, but most communications are now through these tools, mainly for swift messages and when the sellers have a need. Virtuality seems to increase distance, causing the physical meeting places, such as the coffee machine, over the desk, and in the hallway, to be inaccessible. Moreover, it appears that informal and spontaneous interactions have decreased in virtuality. The reason for such a decrease may be the lack of physical availability cues, for example, noticing availability by looking across a desk.

In the literature, scholars find that interpersonal relations impact PS and that solid relations in teams strengthen PS (Kahn, 1990; Edmondson, 2018). To strengthen interpersonal relations, the team members have to interact, build trust and recognize each other, which can be done by asking good questions, showing interest, and being available (Edmondson, 2018). We argue that the reactive change in interactions negatively affects the teams' PS, thus, influencing individuals' performance, consequently, the organization's success. Interactions that build interpersonal relations and foster PS, should be based on more than formal interactions, so the focus is informal interactions.

By establishing *forums for input*, a team might build PS, which is necessary for what Edmondson (2018) refers to as the Fearless Organization. Such forums, or cues, are referred to as physical *windows* or *doors* in the findings. These cues symbolize presence and availability, which encourage input and speaking up. Availability can be understood as input. However, further findings propose that cues of availability lack in virtual settings, which causes informal interactions to diminish. Without the cues, the individuals appear to reach out less virtually,



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implying that the sellers are not taking the initiative to interact informally and building interpersonal relations. Moreover, the organization has multiple virtual tools, meaning that it is challenging for the individuals to reach out to colleagues informally since they have to know in which tool the colleagues may show cues of availability.

The findings propose that the sellers ask for “five minutes” less virtually, especially when there is nothing urgent or if the intent is solely social or informal. Moreover, asking for help or “five minutes” appear to be challenging virtually. This difficulty is explained by the inability to see signs such as how available the team members or leaders are in a virtual setting, which may cause the individuals not wanting to disturb or be a nuisance. Additionally, asking for help is challenging as virtuality requires planning, which the physical interactions do not to the same degree. The quick chat, when needed, seems easier physically than virtually. Such challenges indicate a higher threshold to get help virtually, in other words, the individuals might hold back on “unnecessary” questions or not express themselves virtually. Nembhard and Edmondson (2012) state that predetermined notions of how team members might reach may weaken PS.

When the individuals send a message on Slack, the reply is almost *too swift*. Also, the individuals find that it is harder to disregard messages or video calls. We argue that prompt replies should have led the individuals not to hesitate to reach out virtually, even without availability cues. The perception that one might be a nuisance to colleagues suggests that the individuals do not believe they can express themselves without interpersonal fear (Kahn, 1990; Edmondson, 2018). Therefore, the individuals hold back in contacting team members informally, despite knowing that others reply swiftly. However, findings also demonstrate that it is less strenuous to reach out to colleagues when there is a formal need. Despite an egalitarian culture, as the findings allude to, in a virtual setting, individuals constraint themselves to reach out socially to colleagues. We argue that a lack of virtual cues of availability may create these self-inflicted constraints. On one hand, findings propose that PS is not weakened by virtuality when the individuals have a formal need from team members. On the other hand, restraining oneself from reaching out to team members informally due to lack of availability cues, suggests that virtuality weakens PS.

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We find that informal interactions are limited in virtuality, thus, weakening PS. Additionally, it is found that the gliding transitions to and from physical meetings are nonexistent in virtuality. Also, Tech-Org has increased formal virtual interactions. Kahn (1990) argues that people who experience PS perform better. The leaders have initiated planned informal interactions in formal meetings to compensate for the somewhat nonexistent informal interactions in a virtual setting. For individuals to experience being a part of a team, a virtual team must interact socially and formally to achieve a common goal, as mentioned. In the formal interactions, the leaders have attempted to make amends virtually for the lack of social interaction by scheduling “check-ins” at the start of virtual formal meetings. The social interactions that are missing are, for instance, discussing the weekend in the hallway. However, despite check-ins, which is a proactive change, the leaders relay that they had challenges getting everyone in the meeting to share and participate. To hold back or not truly participate have been discussed earlier, as it speaks to a lower degree of PS.

Scholars propose that individuals in a team that work closely perceive PS similarly (Nemhard & Edmondson, 2012). Nevertheless, as alluded to, the individuals in these teams work individually, which may cause them to experience the PS differently. We argue that the imposed informal interactions can strengthen PS if the conversations or stories told are non-work-related, fostering interpersonal relations between the team members. Such suggestions are supported by Feitosa and Salas (2020) as they propose that individuals should get to know each other on a deeper level. Observations find that the stories shared in planned meetings are informal and of personal character, and there are laughter and immediate responses from the team. Additionally, as the individuals use their camera, the one who speaks can see virtual responses from the others, thus, creating engagement in the meeting. Moreover, acknowledging what cues colleagues convey virtually in planned informal interactions may make it clearer that colleagues are available otherwise. The planned informal interactions in meetings seem to strengthen PS.

Multiple individuals have mentioned the coffee machine in various settings and narratives. It is viewed as a valuable climate that builds interpersonal relations where the individuals can chitchat randomly about everyday matters. We argue that the chitchat referred to in findings is vital to foist the climate that Edmondson (2018) describes as psychologically safe. The coffee machine climate provides

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individuals with a forum to share ideas and concerns. It is random and spontaneous and may require interpersonal risk. However, findings imply that in virtual settings, the coffee machine climate almost disappeared, that is because virtuality often requires planning. A digital coffee machine has been attempted, but the initiative appears unsuccessful because of distance and individualized work. Lastly, as the coffee machine is built on random interactions, it requires cues of availability which is challenging virtually. Therefore, the lack of the coffee machine weakens PS.

Further findings propose that Tech-Org has introduced multiple practices that can strengthen PS and builds interpersonal relations, such as virtual social activities, celebrations, and appreciations. Edmondson and Lei (2014) state that social interactions in teams are factors that positively influence PS. Moreover, scholars suggest that PS also boosts learning, such as interpreting and recognizing virtual cues for input from team members. However, Tech-Org finds social activities virtually to be phony, unnatural, and unappealing. The sellers have also referred to socialization virtually as constructed reality, almost as a videogame. As argued, individuals who spend time together in social settings will likely build interpersonal relations and strengthen PS. Findings allude to a virtual tool, not used in most offices, that allows for social interactions as one would have physically. By using such a tool, some of the negative aspects of virtual social activities can be solved. However, if the individuals find socialization virtually uninspiring and artificial, it may weaken PS, implying that the individuals' cues for input may not be recognized.

In addition, digital appreciation is found to positively influence the individuals, which we argue makes the sellers experience recognition and high esteem under the pandemic. On top of that, digital appreciation strengthens interpersonal relations and aid individuals in recognizing virtual cues of availability. Edmondson (2018) refer to appreciation as a prolific response that boosts PS, hence, a proactive change. Throughout the findings, digital appreciation seems to be linked to celebrations and positive happenings.

Additionally, findings indicate that some individuals restrict themselves in appraisals virtually. One might argue that digital appraisals in Slack or Teams are inadequate. The sellers in Tech-Org use Slack to celebrate by using a virtual bell and making up for the missing physical bell. We question whether virtual celebrations and appreciation, such as thumbs up or smileys, are sufficient

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compared to physical celebrations and appreciations such as body language, smiling faces, and sounds that add to celebratory happenings. However, the individuals find that virtual celebrations and appreciations are good substitutes and have positive effects, mainly due to the pandemic and sudden virtuality. We argue that giving virtual appreciations and celebrations strengthen PS, which is why we propose that it is a sufficient substitute.

### **5.5 Technical Barriers to Recognize Cues**

The camera has been referred to as critical in a virtual setting. The ability to express oneself and show vulnerability by telling personal narratives in uncertainty is more effortless if one *sees* the team members (Nembhard & Edmondson, 2012; Edmondson, 2018; Feitosa & Salas, 2020). In addition, team members may find a more profound understanding behind words if they can read body language and tone. Leaders at Tech-Org urge the use of the camera, and one leader started with morning meetings to see the team members and ensure that they had a positive start to the day. Such proactive changes can strengthen a team's PS since the camera builds interpersonal relations. By seeing colleagues' postures, arms moving, and hearing sounds, the camera may foster interpersonal relations. However, we argue that using the camera to give cues of availability requires sitting with the camera on at all times. Insights show that the majority -  $\frac{3}{4}$  have their cameras on during formal meetings, which makes us question the feasibility of forcing the use of a camera. Further, it might decrease the PS to when individuals are *forced* to use the camera.

Fraction delay is another aspect that impacts the flow of virtual interactions. The technical issue causes particularly informal interactions to flow less, making the individuals wait longer than usual to ensure that no one else is talking. On one hand, fraction delay seems to be a non-issue in planned informal interactions as the individuals take their turn to talk. On the other hand, fraction delay seems to lead to less informal interactions otherwise since they restrain themselves, making the conversation flow less.

Further, individuals argue that it is less appealing to participate because virtual interactions are monotone and staccato, and one cannot see people's body language. As mentioned, if the individuals are less interested in interaction and find it difficult to participate, it might weaken PS as it requires interaction. As a result, fraction delay lessens the engagement in informal interactions and weakens the

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interpersonal relations that boost PS. Additionally, fraction delay causes individuals not to truly participate, suggesting low or no degree of PS.

## 5.6 Leadership and Psychological Safety

Earlier, we have elaborated on our findings on leadership in Tech-Org. The sensitized concepts are how leaders approach uncertainty, setting expectations, heart-to-heart and one-on-one conversations, digital appreciation and appraisals, team members' approach to their leaders, and the overall leader's availability. That being said, we have mentioned leadership as a driver in PS in our literature review. Also, Edmondson (2018) has created the Leader's Toolkit that aims to build PS.

Simultaneously to our study, research has been conducted specifically on Covid-19, where scholars looked at leadership and found recommendations to deal with the pandemic. Additionally, Edmondson discussed "Psychological safety, emotional intelligence, and leadership in a time of flux" in an interview with McKinsey Quarterly (2020) with another scholar and two McKinsey senior partners. In the interview, they highlight how "bringing together, energizing forward progress, and reimagining normalcy" can direct leadership in the current time of Covid-19. Following is how our findings direct the leaders in Tech-Org to build and nourish PS.

How the leaders approach uncertainty is emphasized and mentioned, especially in one office. However, we did not specifically ask the leaders about their approach towards uncertainty since we had an identical interview guide regardless of whether they were a team member or a leader. In another office, the leader initiated a physical session as he saw the need for the team to meet and talk about uncertainty. In the last office, we did not explicitly observe stories indicating such proactive changes. However, that does not necessarily mean that the latter office did not acknowledge the uncertainty or the pandemic. Edmondson (2018) mentions that lack of PS intertwined with uncertainty makes for lower team performance. This suggests that acknowledging uncertainty and applying PS is crucial for organizations to achieve success.

Moreover, Pisano (2019) differentiates between productive and unproductive failures, where a productive failure produces information relative to the costs. In this case, failure could be perceived as dubious due to high levels of uncertainty. The teams can seemingly *blame* external factors for failures; however, the leaders

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are fully aware of the difficulties in achieving success. This awareness is shared by leaders, meaning that the overall failure is productive as the individuals simultaneously learn through failure. However, productive on a different level, due to the external factors.

In this case, the leaders seem to proactively change to uncertainty as they gather the team and initiate sessions. The Leader's Toolkit by Edmondson (2018) explains how leaders should frame the work by setting expectations about failure, uncertainty, and interdependence to clarify the need for voice. We believe that the leaders proactively do this when gathering the team members to talk about the uncertainty and expectations. The latter aspect of expectations is a proactive change by both the leaders and the team members.

Although uncertainty itself is a part of the Leader's Toolkit, the leaders' *invite participation*, similar to *availability*, making up for the team members' perceived uncertainty. Some employees felt the need to approach the leaders for heart-to-heart conversations, where leaders seem to have initiated routinely one-on-ones which is a proactive attempt to create a forum for input. Although the leaders were available, the team members might not feel psychologically safe approaching the leaders or fully expressing themselves. By looking back at how availability cues are virtually challenging, we suggest that the employees do not experience leaders as available. Therefore, the leaders should perhaps set the stage and emphasize the uncertainty to a more considerable degree so that the individuals themselves can be curious and pick up early indicators of change (Edmondson, 2018).

Furthermore, another aspect of the Leader's Toolkit is that the leaders should emphasize purpose by recognizing what is at stake (Edmondson, 2018). As mentioned in our findings, a leader comforts the team members by saying they will not lose their jobs. Instead, the team members together should shift focus, implying a proactive change. We propose that this leader does not show overconfidence or overpromises solutions to the employees, which Edmondson mentions to be vital under Covid-19 (McKinsey Quarterly, 2020). Also, when the leader suggests shifting focus, she *destigmatizes failure* by looking forward, which is another aspect of the Leader's Toolkit (Edmondson, 2018).

The seller role itself seems to have high ambitions and expectations. At the same time, the pandemic is affecting the world's economies, where people are getting

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laid off. Those aspects combined might create immense pressure for the sellers to achieve goals. Also, several individuals mention that “you are most likely to get fired if you do not sell,” regardless of a pandemic. Therefore, the seller role and the pandemic might hinder the achievement of individual and organizational goals, which might build more considerable uncertainty. Due to the external factors and increased pressure to deliver, a leader should set expectations about failure (Edmondson, 2018). We suggest that one leader set such expectations by emphasizing that Tech-Org is not firing anyone, although there are no sales. The leader shared expectations and meaning under uncertain times, which strengthens PS. In addition, as leaders listen to the team members and acknowledge their concerns, demonstrates that they express appreciation, thus, the leaders foster PS.

Furthermore, individuals mention the need to discuss failures, not just “pink skies when it’s not pink,” which implies that some leaders do not destigmatize failure. Nevertheless, the individuals seem to bring the need of discussing failures to their leader, and the leader then takes the initiative to discuss. The latter proactive change indicates that the leader listens; thus, the leader strengthens PS. Other individuals mention that failing in Tech-Org does not harm your personality or work efforts, as it is a “smooth ride.” The individual suggests that it is unproblematic to fail because the leaders know that team members do their best. Further, findings state that the leaders boost the individuals with pep talks to deal with failure, uncertainty, and the pressure to sell. Such pep talks indicate that the leaders respond productively by listening, looking forward, and discussing. Therefore, leaders should proactively handle uncertainty to sustain or strengthen PS by setting the stage, inviting participation, and responding productively (Edmondson, 2018).

In addition to setting the stage and destigmatizing failure, Edmondson shares that, specifically in Covid-19, leaders should explicitly frame the opportunity as a creative exercise where people “craft the journey together” (McKinsey Quarterly, 2020). One leader looks forward and redirects the team to increase competency internally to become better equipped when the market opens up again. Such sessions may be viewed as a creative exercise where individuals can share knowledge and experiences under uncertainty and for the future. However, that requires that the individuals can express themselves without interpersonal fear. In addition, another leader, as mentioned earlier, gathered the team as he saw the need. We assume that during such specific sessions, team members could participate in



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crafting the future. In these creative exercises, the team can “discuss, consider, and brainstorm next steps” (Edmondson, 2018, p. 159). Therefore, by framing the work, emphasizing purpose by shifting focus, and destigmatize failure, we propose that the leaders build PS. However, as our findings on such leadership tasks are limited, it is unknown if all the team leaders build PS under the pandemic.

Earlier, we have elaborated on how individuals adapt to virtuality, meaning that availability cues are less visible. Still, it seems like leaders are available even though the organization has gone home office, implying that team members can share concerns. We question if the availability is clear enough when communication and interactions are done primarily through virtual tools, additionally, whether the leaders have tackled the lack of availability cues virtually with proactive changes. As previously discussed, from the team members’ perspective, availability cues are limited in virtuality, weakening PS.

Although the leaders might have personal struggles themselves, they should take responsibility for the people in uncertain times (McKinsey Quarterly, 2020). In addition to the physical session above, the heart-to-hearts and one-on-ones, the team members and the leaders ask good questions, listens, and creates a forum for input. Therefore, the leadership seems to provide confidence that voice is welcome, hence, building PS (Edmondson, 2018). In addition, the leaders imply that they have accomplished orientation toward continuous learning. Therefore, the leaders seem to build PS in their teams proactively. However, there is still potential to foster PS by working towards finding virtual replacements for physical aspects and climates valued by the individuals, including virtual availability cues. Overall, many insights indicate that the pandemic and sudden virtuality hinder PS meaning that leaders should make proactive changes and implement PS into the organization’s agenda and routines.

### **5.7 Managing External Uncertainty versus Managing PS**

The discussion above implies a need for leaders to buffer the external uncertainty of the pandemic to the team members. However, leaders must recognize that there is a difference between buffering for the uncertainty of the pandemic and buffering for PS. Moreover, recognizing that managing external uncertainty can have a ripple effect on PS.



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We believe that when the leaders foster interpersonal relations in teams under the pandemic and uncertainty, they simultaneously buffer for PS. By buffering for uncertainty in the pandemic means that leaders must acknowledge that there are reactive changes. Such changes are, for instance, sudden virtuality and uncertainty of whether one might lose their job. In resemblance, buffering for PS implies that the leaders must recognize that proactive and reactive changes may impact employees' PS. Leaders should speak out and be *transparent* about the uncertainty and how they intend to manage it (Pisano, 2019). Moreover, leaders should manage failures related directly to uncertainty by destigmatizing failure, hence, the team members might tackle the uncertainty, which may boost PS. By buffering for PS leaders might create a climate that can withstand changes, such as uncertainty in a pandemic. The difference between managing external uncertainty and managing PS seems to be lacking in research, thus, a gap in academia. Therefore, we suggest that such differentiation should be researched further.

## **6 Practical Recommendations for Tech-Org**

The findings and overall research of the sales teams in Tech-Org have emerged theories and sensitized concepts on what strengthens and weakens PS under the pandemic and sudden virtuality. Therefore, we have identified practical recommendations Tech-Org can apply or use as guides in the current situation and for the future. These recommendations can provide insights in the sales teams, while giving Tech-Org the opportunity to learn and develop.

### **# 1 Create a Culture of Teamwork**

Our research suggests that the sellers are motivated and driven by personal goals. Although they seem available for each other, virtuality has increased distance to already individualized work. Tech-Org should emphasize common goals and teamwork to realize their full potential and ensure a psychologically safe climate. If Tech-Org leaders create incentives based on team feeling, they might boost the sellers to nourish teamwork. By acknowledging teamwork and the importance of it, the organization and the sellers might be able to achieve tremendous success.

### **# 2 Emphasize and Destigmatize Failure as Joint Responsibility**

Findings suggest that failure is not emphasized and that the leaders do not destigmatize failure explicitly under uncertainty. The leaders should ensure that the team members experience failure as a joint responsibility, especially as virtuality

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increases distance and individualized work. By using Edmondson's (2018) Leader's Toolkit, the leaders can discuss, consider, and brainstorm the next steps, which is a way to destigmatize failure. If the leaders can emphasize and destigmatize failure as a joint responsibility, not as individual responsibility, they may boost teamwork. Additionally, joint responsibility might make it easier for the team members to express failure and ask for help.

### **# 3 Craft a Journey Together**

In the time of pandemic and uncertainty, the leaders should support the sellers and solve problems as a team sport where they identify possible creative opportunities and invite individuals to *craft the journey together*. Our data collection is limited due to how much the sellers can influence the upcoming journey; however, we suggest the leaders include the team members when crafting a "new normal." Then, the team members will get to know each other on a deeper level, and the pandemic can be used in favor of the organization – not as a disturbing outside factor, but rather as a creative exercise (McKinsey Quarterly, 2020).

### **# 4 Encouraging Sharing Minor Problems**

Our research suggests that heart-to-hearts are essential to some individuals. That being said, although leaders have integrated monthly one-on-ones, they should portray further availability, although they work virtually. The leaders should emphasize that minor problems are also important to share, opening up for all concerns the team members might have, despite the uncertainty of the pandemic and sudden virtuality. Moreover, the leaders should be good examples and share smaller or bigger problems with the teams. Physical heart-to-hearts should also be an opportunity if it is by Covid-19 regulations.

### **# 5 Digital Coffee Machine in Virtual Rooms**

Throughout the study, the lack of the coffee machine symbolizes random interactions between the employees, which the individuals seem to miss. This climate builds interpersonal relations and gives the employees the possibility to share and ask questions, work-related and personal. By employing a digital coffee machine for maybe an hour a day, those who have the urge and time can log in and say hello. As the individuals state that social activities virtually are found phony and constructed, using a virtual tool that allows for choosing "rooms" could tackle

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such constraints. By doing so, the employees can talk to a few and not all at once, which imposes everyone to listen to one at a time.

### **# 6 Virtual Cues of Availability**

The cues of availability found physically are less apparent virtually. It is challenging virtually to reach out to others with less urgent matters because individuals do not know if the others are available. Such a problem may be vital for the leaders to handle, as walking into an office is often what employees choose to do with leaders, to talk formally or informally. The virtual tools have possibilities that can handle availability cues; however, it requires knowledge and consistent use of such virtual symbols, like a coffee emoji (☕) or the text “available for a chat” in Slack or Teams. Leaders should set the stage by setting expectations and share the meaning of such symbols with the employees. By doing so, the employees might experience a feeling of acceptance to reach out when they see such symbols, hence, cues of availability.

## **7 Limitations, Reflections, and Future Research**

### **7.1 Anonymization**

Anonymization limits data on demographics, live situations, and further personal attributes. Those aspects might be crucial in our study as they provide insightful information on how individuals express themselves virtually. In addition, there was a potential to improve the storytelling by including facial expressions and other observations of personal character, which we rejected to maintain anonymization.

### **7.2 Social Desirability Bias**

Bell and her colleagues (2019, p. 596) define social desirability bias as “a distortion of response that is caused by respondents’ attempts to construct an account that conforms to a socially acceptable model of belief or behavior.” We believe that social desirability bias is highly crucial in our research. The individuals we interviewed know that the master thesis may be shared with others in the organization, meaning that individuals might be worried that information could reveal their identity and statements. The worries on exposing themselves if the organization negatively perceives the content, the individuals might respond in favor of the organization. This means that social desirability bias limits the data as

we need the respondents to be open and honest to ensure that we look from their perspectives (Bell et al., 2019).

### **7.3 The Aspect of Leadership**

As mentioned earlier, the interview guide is identical regardless of being a team member or leader. That being said, it might have been beneficial to tailor the interview guides so that we could have made questions that are specifically directed to leadership roles. For instance, leaders in one office seem to have neglected the need to emphasize purpose and vision under uncertainty, leading us to conclude that those leaders did not build PS. Therefore, only having one interview guide leads to a lack of data, limiting our research.

### **7.4 Limited Theoretical Saturation**

In hindsight, we suggest theoretical saturation was somewhat limited as we strived to get more data to answer the research question. We interviewed participants in three offices wherein one of them, we believe we lacked insights. Unfortunately, it was not possible to increase the number of cases at this office. In addition, we had a secondary research method – observation, where we observed a weekly meeting. That being said, further observation of such weekly meetings could provide more significant insights into our study.

### **7.5 The Research Setting and Personal Reflections**

During the study, one of the researchers worked part-time in Tech-Org, which gave us a further understanding of the findings. Nevertheless, we maintained objectivity as the other researcher ensured that the researcher's subjectivity as a Tech-Org employee, would not affect our research.

The motivation to do our study was to look at how the pandemic and sudden virtuality affected PS in teams. With time, it seems like the participants have adapted to the “new normal,” which may propose that our research is less applicable. However, the individuals were able to reflect back in time, giving us insights into how it was in the beginning of the pandemic.

Our positive experiences with adapting to virtuality suggest that it is possible to work virtually. However, in writing this master thesis, we have personally experienced limitations to virtuality, such as fraction delay. Another limitation is virtual interactions with co-students that we did not know before, as the interaction

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was insufficient compared to physical interactions. Nevertheless, a positive note on virtual work is how effective it is, especially if one knows the team member quite well such as researchers of this thesis. Solid interpersonal relations allow for expressing ideas, opinions, and failures, making it easier virtually.

## 7.6 Future Research

Firstly, we propose to have found a gap in academia when we combined the theory of PS with the pandemic and sudden virtuality. Literature emphasizes PS in *physical* teams, which limits the application of literature in our research. Therefore, also ethically, there should be further examination of the PS in virtual teams under uncertainty and crisis to ensure that society can be aware of the potential harm. Moreover, we questioned whether Tech-Org's sales teams could be viewed as actual virtual *teams* per mentioned literature during the study. Such a query may suggest that future research should also look at this phenomenon in teams who work closely together virtually. Additionally, future research should look at how PS is affected by individualized work in uncertainty. Secondly, the difference between managing external uncertainty and managing PS seems to be lacking in research, thus, a gap in academia. A gap that has been elaborated on in the previous section, which we propose, needs further research. Lastly, the urge to use the camera seems to differ between the sizes of the participants in virtual meetings. Therefore, we encourage further examination of the correlation between camera and group size.

## 8 Conclusion

After a comprehensive data collection and analysis, our discussion has emerged changes that might have strengthened or weakened PS. We found that the pandemic and sudden virtuality urges the leaders to buffer for external uncertainty. Also, sudden virtuality exaggerates the already individualized seller role as the individuals seem to become more distant from the team. Moreover, employees grapple with the new normal and virtuality differently, where findings imply that domestic relations, age, and experience are crucial aspects. There is also a gap between oldtimers and newcomers where individuals express themselves differently according to age and experience. Also, findings show that individuals struggle with informal and spontaneous interactions with virtuality due to a lack of physical cues. However, leaders increase planned sessions with the teams to aid with the absence of such informal interactions. In addition, we found that culture,

hearth-to-hearts and one-on-ones, digital appreciation, and virtual celebrations build interpersonal relations. Lastly, findings insinuate that employees respond to failure differently.

In our discussion, identifying reactive and proactive changes can aid the leaders of Tech-Org to acknowledge what “just happens” and what is in their control. We found that the seller role and the individualized work limit common goals and teamwork, making it harder to strengthen PS. Moreover, decreased informal interactions seem to weaken PS, however, planned interactions formally and informally strengthens PS. Digital appreciations and virtual celebrations are prolific responses that strengthen PS. Additionally, individuals understand availability cues better due to proactive changes such as heart-to-hearts and planned informal virtual interactions, thus, decreasing the distance created by increased individualized work. Such proactive changes can strengthen interpersonal relations and PS, making it easier for individuals to express themselves virtually. Lastly, the leaders should make proactive changes by setting the stage, inviting participation, and responding productively, strengthening PS. By building strong interpersonal relations, thus, strengthening PS under the pandemic and sudden virtuality, Tech-Org will likely increase performance on the individual level, consequently achieving organizational success.

The six recommendations aim to encourage how Tech-Org should tackle uncertainty and virtuality, hence, build PS and give insights into the sellers’ current setting. Furthermore, we suggest that anonymization, social desirability bias, the aspect of leadership, and theoretical saturation limit our research. Also, our reflections on the research setting and objectivity are highlighted. Finally, for future research, we encourage researchers to look at our identified gaps in academia. In conclusion, several reactive and proactive changes weaken or strengthen PS under Covid-19 and sudden virtuality, where leaders should make changes to ensure a psychologically safe climate under uncertainty.

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