

# **Remote Leadership Practices and Challenges in Small Companies: A Qualitative Exploration of Communication, Time Zones, Culture, and Productivity**

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National College of Ireland

Submitted to the National College of Ireland, August 2025



National College of Ireland

## Project Submission Sheet

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**Submission Due Date:** ...15.08.2025.....

**Project** .... Remote Leadership Practices and Challenges in Small Companies: A  
**Title:** Qualitative Exploration of Communication, Time Zones, Culture and  
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Remote Leadership Practices and Challenges in Small Companies: A Qualitative Exploration of Communication, Time Zones, Culture and Productivity

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What is thematic analysis?	Thematic analysis is a method used in qualitative research to identify, analyze, and interpret

patterns (or *themes*) within a set of data—often from interviews, focus groups, open-ended survey responses, or documents.

Here's the idea in plain terms: you take a big pile of raw, messy, descriptive data and comb through it to find recurring ideas or concepts that capture something important about the research question.

**Key points about thematic analysis:**

- **Purpose:** It's about finding meaning, not just counting words. You're looking for underlying ideas that connect parts of the data.
- **Data type:** Usually qualitative, but sometimes it's combined with other approaches.
- **Flexibility:** It doesn't require a strict theoretical framework—you can use it with different research philosophies (e.g., psychology, sociology, education, business).
- **Outcome:** A set of themes that represent patterns across your dataset, supported by direct quotes or examples.

## Evidence of AI Usage

This section includes evidence of significant prompts and responses used or generated through the AI tool. It should provide a clear understanding of the extent to which the AI tool was used in the assignment. Evidence may be attached via screenshots or text.

## Additional Evidence:

what is thematic analysis?

Thematic analysis is a method used in qualitative research to identify, analyze, and interpret patterns (or *themes*) within a set of data—often from interviews, focus groups, open-ended survey responses, or documents.

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- **Outcome:** A set of themes that represent patterns across your dataset, supported by direct quotes or examples.

# Additional Evidence:

What is reflexivity in a dissertation?

In a dissertation—especially one using qualitative methods—**reflexivity** is when you critically examine your own role, perspectives, and potential influence on the research process.

It's about recognizing that you, as the researcher, are **not a neutral robot** taking data from the world—you bring your own background, assumptions, values, and positionality, which can affect:

- **What questions you ask**
- **How you collect and interpret data**
- **How participants respond to you**
- **What you choose to emphasize in your findings**

**Why it matters in a dissertation:**

Reflexivity increases *transparency* and *trustworthiness*. By openly reflecting on your own standpoint, readers can better judge how your interpretations were shaped.

**Common aspects to reflect on:**

- **Positionality:** Your identity, background, and relationship to participants or topic.
- **Assumptions:** Pre-existing beliefs or theories you might (consciously or unconsciously) bring in.
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**National College of Ireland  
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(*Thesis/Author Declaration Form*)**

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**Degree for which thesis is submitted: MSc in Management**

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**Title of Thesis: Remote Leadership Practices and Challenges in Small Companies:  
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## Table of Contents

Project Submission Sheet.....	2
AI Acknowledgment.....	5
Submission of Thesis and Dissertation .....	9
Abstract .....	16
1. Introduction .....	17
1.1 <i>Rationale</i> .....	17
2. Literature Review .....	18
2.1 <i>Introduction</i> .....	18
2.2 <i>Communication in Remote Teams</i> .....	19
2.2.1 E-Leadership Theory .....	19
2.3 <i>Impact of Time Zone Differences</i> .....	21
2.4 <i>Cultural Differences in Remote Teams</i> .....	22
2.5 <i>Productivity in Remote Teams</i> .....	24
2.6 <i>Research Gap</i> .....	26
3. Research Questions .....	28
3.1 <i>Aim and Objectives</i> .....	28
4. Methodology .....	29
4.1 <i>Research Design</i> .....	29
4.2 <i>Participants</i> .....	30
4.2.1 Sample Size .....	30
Tabel 4.2.2 Participant Demographic Table .....	31
4.3 <i>Data Collection</i> .....	32
4.4 <i>Data Analysis</i> .....	33
4.5 <i>Ethical Considerations</i> .....	35
4.5.1 Ethical Approval .....	35
4.5.2 Participant Safety.....	35
4.5.3 Consent Form and Right to Withdraw.....	35

4.5.4 Confidentiality .....	36
4.5.5 Data Storage .....	36
4.5.6 Interviewing .....	36
4.5.7 Mandatory Disclosure and Debriefing .....	36
4.5.8 Reflexivity .....	37
4.6 Reflexivity.....	37
<b>5. Results Chapter .....</b>	<b>39</b>
<i>Tabel 5 Summary of Final Themes from Thematic Analysis .....</i>	39
5.1 <i>Theme 1: Digital Platform Reliance .....</i>	40
5.1.1 Communication Overload .....	40
5.1.2 Transparency .....	41
5.2 <i>Theme 2: Managing Time Zone Differences.....</i>	42
5.2.1 Challenges.....	42
5.2.2 Solutions .....	42
5.3 <i>Theme 3: Leading Cross-Cultural and Communication Practices.....</i>	43
5.4 <i>Theme 4: Monitoring Productivity and Work Visibility .....</i>	45
5.5 <i>Theme 5: Empathetic and Empowering Leadership .....</i>	46
5.5.1 Connection vs Disconnection .....	46
5.5.2 Decision-Making.....	47
5.5.3 Burnout .....	47
<b>6. Discussion .....</b>	<b>49</b>
6.1 <i>Key Findings.....</i>	49
6.2 <i>Implications of the Research.....</i>	51
6.3 <i>Strengths and Limitations.....</i>	52
6.3.1 Strengths.....	52
6.3.2 Limitations.....	53
6.4 <i>Recommendations for Future Research .....</i>	55
<b>7. Conclusion .....</b>	<b>56</b>
<b>8. Bibliography .....</b>	<b>57</b>
<b>9. Appendices.....</b>	<b>62</b>
<i>Appendix A: Invitation to Participate in Research Study .....</i>	62
<i>Appendix B: Participant Information Sheet.....</i>	64
<i>Appendix C: Consent Form .....</i>	66
<i>Appendix D: Transcript .....</i>	68



## **Abstract**

The transition to remote work has hugely affected small companies in managing teams. But research on leadership in remote settings is still limited. This study focused on how leaders in small companies work through the complications of managing remote teams. Notably in communication, different time zones, diverse cultures, and productivity. This research employed a qualitative method, conducting semi-structured online interviews with five participants who are in leadership positions in small remote teams. Data were collected through voice recording and employed thematic analysis to reveal recurrent themes and understandings from the real-life experiences of the participants. Five key themes were developed. They are Digital Platform Reliance, Managing Time Zone Differences, Leading Cross-Cultural and Communication Practices, Monitoring Productivity and Work Visibility, and Empathetic and Empowering Leadership. These key findings disclosed that remote leadership expands further than digital workflow management. It requires a balance of strategic communication, cultural awareness and emotional intelligence. The findings offer an understanding of remote leadership by focusing on flexibility, trust and empathy in managing successful geographically dispersed teams.

# 1. Introduction

The global workforce has changed significantly in recent years caused by innovations in communication technology and the COVID-19 pandemic (Bula et al., 2024). For many organizations, remote work settings have become a standard component. It modifies communication, collaboration and performance within teams. But most of the existing literature has focused on large organizations with multiple resources (Zafer and Roslind, 2020). Small companies face various challenges in adjusting to these shifts. Leaders in small companies must manage complex operational and workplace relationship tensions in remote environments with leaner structures and fewer organizational assistance systems. Regarding the lack of physical presence and casual interactions, remote leadership requires adjusting traditional frameworks (Steenkamp and Dhanesh, 2023). Sustaining clear communication, enabling equal participation through different time zones, and coordinating diverse cultures are intensified challenges for small companies that are operating globally (Andrea et al., 2022). These demands expand further operational management. It requires high levels of emotional awareness, relationship building, and optimized use of digital tools (Avolio et al., 2000).

The importance of digital communication tools in optimizing remote work settings is highlighted in the existing literature (Flores, 2019). However, it also indicates potential risks such as overcommunicating and screen-time fatigue. Moreover, most studies have focused only on large organizations which leaves a gap in understanding how these processes play out in small companies with limited resources. Analyzing this gap is crucial because small companies become more reliant on globally distributed teams and account for a significant proportion of the economy in world.

## 1.1 Rationale

This study examines a gap in the literature, specifically the strategies and experiences of remote team leaders in small companies. Research on remote leadership and virtual teamwork is extensive (Avolio et al., 2000). However, there is a notable lack of observations in small companies. This research reveals detailed, real-life experiences that are often missing from large-scale quantitative research by using a qualitative method. The findings will expand theoretical insight. In addition, it will also provide practical guidance for leaders working in a virtual world in small organizations.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Introduction

The global workforce has been reformed by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has been boosting the change to hybrid and remote work functions all over the world. Small companies often encountered unusual challenges because of minimalist management structure, insufficient resources and casual communication models, even though large companies had the support system to adjust quickly (Zafer and Roslind, 2020). According to this, remote management in small companies has arisen as a divergent and unstudied area in the larger discussion. This literature review objectively analyzes the theoretical and experimental basis of remote team leadership inside of small companies. Remote management leadership needs more than merely recreating conservative management styles across digital platforms. The change has enhanced familiar challenges such as miscommunications, obstacles in supervising performance, working together through different time zones, and dealing with diverse cultures which are all more intense and difficult in smaller organizations due to lower support systems (Lateef, 2024). Empowering leadership and remote leadership theories support helpful conceptual tools for understanding how encouragement, trust, collaboration and inspiration are built up in remote teams. Nonetheless, the existing research focuses only on large organizations which leaves a gap in how we understand how small companies manage efficiently in remote work settings.

This literature review is organized into four major problem areas which are communication obstacles, time zone differences, cultural differences, and performance in remote teams, clarified in both the literature and research proposal. The review explains a critical insight into how these elements affect leadership performance in small companies by combining the latest theoretical and empirical studies. As a result, it not only frames the research problem but also clarifies gaps, knowing that this dissertation aims to approach with thematic analysis.

## 2.2 Communication in Remote Teams

In virtual work environments, efficient and clear communication is the most important basis of effective leadership. Leaders in on-site work environments lean on casual chats and physical expressions when it comes to managing a team. But a virtual work environment is different, particularly in small companies. These communication methods are disturbed and miscommunication, lack of interest, and disconnected teamwork often come out as results (Flores, 2019).

Small companies operate differently from larger corporations. They manage without organizational communication or advanced digital systems but with clear communication approaches (Zafer and Roslind, 2020). According to the reports of leaders in small virtual teams, misunderstanding was a major factor affecting team productivity. Moreover, it showed the need for systematic communication plans in remote work environments (Lateef, 2024). Especially asynchronous tools that do not need real-time interaction for collaboration and communication, for example, email, Slack, and Asana, have both positive and negative impacts. If it is not handled efficiently, they can also lead to wrong assumptions, misunderstanding and confusion over expectations even though they are flexible when it comes to communication (Coppola et al, 2004). According to the experimental study, no physical engagement reduces natural interactions or casual chats that generally build trust and teamwork harmony (Bula et al., 2024). Thus, leaders in small companies must take the initiative to create regular check-ins with the team members. For example, managers should do regular one-on-one video calls with each team member and frequent team meetings to check their performance and keep the momentum. Remote team members seem to face disconnection from the team and lack of inspiration if they do not get regular communication and check-ins from their managers. This can result in a decrease in the performance of the team (Flores, 2019).

### 2.2.1 E-Leadership Theory

Remote leadership or E-leadership theory is specifically applicable from a conceptual perspective in this area. It emphasizes the online communication platforms to guide and lead virtual team members (Avolio et al., 2000). E-leadership theory highlights the digital adaptability, transparency and visibility in organizational communication from leadership. Recent research traces its

progression within the wider range of e-leadership, which extends beyond proficiency in digital tools to integrate long-term vision and relational impact in digital environments. Bauwens and Cortellazzo (2024) state that digital leadership extends across two elements: business-focused strategy and relational competencies like empathy and adaptability. An empirical study strengthens this shift. Boccoli et al. (2024) reveal that the digital communication skills of a supervisor hugely moderate the effect of transformative leadership on remote work engagement. It emphasizes the role of competence in digital technologies. These findings advise that remote team leadership not only needs to be proficient in digital tools. But also requires a balance of emotional intelligence, practical thinking, and cultural awareness to sustain team engagement and productivity in remote settings.

Moreover, they must adjust their communication method to align with remote settings. Such as email or text-based communication does not involve emotional depth as the way in-person interactions. Therefore, if leaders are not thoughtful in their tone and communication style, it can impact the team spirit in a negative way (Steenkamp and Dhanesh, 2023).

In addition, communication obstacles in virtual teams are not only about planning and coordination but also about emotions. According to Coppola et al. (2004), it shows that in remote teams, it is really difficult to earn trust and maintain it particularly when the communication is irregular or lacking emotional engagement. Recent empirical studies highlight that online communication platforms can hugely affect trust and team harmony due to the lack of emotional closeness. According to the study of Chinyuku and Qutieshat (2025), digital tools assist workflow coordination, however, they often act as a barrier to team harmony and depth of interpersonal connection in remote teams. This aligns with Badrinarayanan's (2024) finding, which discovers well-defined leadership strategies that effectively build trust in remote work environments. It also highlights that trust must be reinforced through verbal clarification when there is no physical interaction. In addition, Ertiö (2024) reveals that a lack of emotional intelligence or over-assertive online communication can cause negative emotional reactions within team members. This can diminish team confidence and delay decisions. These studies advise that successful remote leadership requires not only proficiency with digital tools but also reflecting with emotional awareness. Without in-person interaction, emotionally intelligent communication practices strengthen team bonding, trust and warmth in remote teams. This is applicable especially in small

companies where team unity significantly relies on social relationships and casual communication paths. That is why leaders must use communication to deliver information, support emotional connection and involvement in the team.

Leaders in remote teams face major challenges when it comes to communication in small companies. Since there is no in-person interaction, the communication only depends on offline communication tools and insufficient framework. Due to that, leaders need to use a strategic and flexible communication approach.

## **2.3 Impact of Time Zone Differences**

In small companies, the difference in time zone is one of the most complicated and ongoing challenges in remote management. Small companies usually depend on an adaptable work schedule and adjustable operations. Leaders must deal with the communication problems and operational challenges that occur from different work hours since small companies expand the talent search geographically and lower operational expenses (Zafer and Roslind, 2020). Different from large organizations which have internal HR departments, leaders in small companies are specifically accountable for working across different time zones. It affects team bonding and communication.

Delayed feedback is one of the major issues in remote teams due to the time zone differences. It can take longer when it comes to the process of decision-making and lead to delays in workflow and engagement if team members work on different time slots (Steenkamp and Dhanesh, 2023). Especially in fast-moving and high-pressure environments, this is irritating and challenging since adaptability and frequent updates are required for the team. Additionally, arranging instant meetings is hard to make. According to Zafer and Roslind (2020), leaders in remote teams usually encounter lack of interest or reluctance from team members. Especially when the meetings are in the early morning or late night due to different time zones, employees feel that they are not included in the team because of scheduling conflicts. Unequal participation in the team is another problem. Employees in aligned time zones are more likely to lead all discussions but other employees feel excluded or drained by frequent meetings because of unusual working times. Because of this kind of unequal participation, it can lead to undermining trust, blocking contributions, and reducing collaboration due to the geographically different locations, but not the

case of role or position. When building successful leadership in remote teams, these factors can diminish the openness and team bonding.

Leaders in remote teams must implement adjustable and accessible scheduling approaches to overcome these challenges. One of the recommended practices is alternating meeting times. This allows employees to attend occasionally at convenient times and also take turns attending outside regular work hours. Moreover, the reliance on live interaction and collaboration across different time zones in remote teams can be reduced by implementing offline communication systems, for example, leaving comments on Asana, video updates and shared documents (Steenkamp and Dhanesh, 2023). This matches the standards and guidelines of leadership in virtual teams which highlights tech flexibility and accessible communication practices in teams working across locations (Avolio et al., 2000). Moreover, leaders in small companies must encourage consistent record-keeping practices and outline requirements and response times to make it transparent with no pressure for instant replies. Also, leaders must support team members to overlap work hours even if it is only one or two hours per day. It can help build and maintain social bonds between team members and reduce communication delay. These kinds of overlapping work hours in remote teams across different time zones can greatly improve team engagement and lower delays in the process of projects.

Successful remote leadership in small companies can be affected by time zone differences which is one of the major challenges. These obstacles are not just about logistics but also relate to fairness, team spirit and how well the team works. Nonetheless, leaders in remote teams can reduce these obstacles by alternating meeting hours, offline communication platforms, and adjustable working hours and also build more open, reactive, and high performing virtual teams.

## 2.4 Cultural Differences in Remote Teams

Remote teams usually consist of employees from different cultural backgrounds as the remote work expands across international borders. It can create the potential for disagreement, miscommunication, and incompatibility due to the diverse cultures even though the geographic dispersion of remote teams can advance information exchange and modernization. Especially in small companies that may not have formal HR departments or organizational inclusion teams,

leaders in remote teams have to manage these differences and it is quite challenging (Andrea et al., 2022). Awareness of cultural differences is a critical leadership skill or requirement nowadays in geographically distributed teams, no longer a choice.

Communication differences are the most challenging problems for leaders in remote teams with team members from different cultural backgrounds. For example, communication is more likely to be straightforward and unambiguous in some countries with low-context culture countries such as the UK and Switzerland. However, communication needs to be more polite and relies on different social norms in Korea, Japan and Southeast Asian countries. If it is not managed efficiently, these differences can lead to misunderstandings or assumed rudeness (Steenkamp and Dhanesh, 2023). Additionally, employees from low-context cultures may be more open and prefer saying it out loud about their opinions. But those from high-context cultures may feel uncomfortable when they have to talk about their disagreement in group settings like video calls. If leaders do not have cultural sensitivity, they might misjudge the mute response as agreement or they might misunderstand directness as overly dominant expression (Hayati and Sinha, 2024). Work method differences and dispute resolution also create serious challenges. In remote teams, some employees may prioritize adaptability and collaborative decision-making but other team members may prefer formalized processes and well-established reporting lines. Managing conflict also depends on different cultures. Constructive feedback in one culture may be seen as aggressive while it is essential in other cultures (Andrea et al., 2022). It will create tensions between the members and affect team harmony if cultural norms are neglected or unexpressed.

Leaders must introduce culturally responsive practices and support cultural awareness to reduce these problems. Cross-cultural awareness workshops are the initial action that is realistic and helps teams acknowledge their awareness of personal assumptions and others' favored approaches. In the collaboration process, leaders can define group standards or create shared working agreements in the early stage especially in remote teams. Leaders and team members can together build a communication framework, define clear expectations for the decision-making process, and clearly talk about the feedback to give and receive. These kinds of settings in a team can reduce the lack of clarity and support fair treatment. According to the qualitative case study of Mafalda (2021), leaders who express compassion and flexibility were greatly more achieving and high-performing when it comes to building team bonding than the leaders who depend entirely on formalized

communication standards. Recent studies have revealed that empathy guided by servant leadership cultivates awareness and creates an emotional safe space among team members (Miralles et al., 2024). Quantitative study also states that empathetic leadership elevates the well-being of employees. It results increase in engagement and suggests a clearly defined structure to build a stronger bond in the team (Pansini et al., 2024).

In remote teams with diverse cultures, equity-focused leadership that is based on understanding, listening, and moral care is crucial in team management (Steenkamp and Dhanesh, 2023). Empathetic leaders not only accept the differences in the team but also interact with the team members. Thus, it creates emotional safety or a secure space for team members to show their different opinions. Differences in culture are a natural element in international remote teams across the world. Leaders may face higher risks especially in small companies with insufficient resources. Confidence in one another, teamwork, and performance can be diminished by intercultural misunderstandings. Nonetheless, these obstacles in remote teams can turn into different prospects for stronger group development through strategic plans, for example cultural sensitivity workshops, building mutual team agreements and empathetic leadership practices.

## **2.5 Productivity in Remote Teams**

In remote teams, one of the most critically analyzed components is productivity. With limited resources, each team member plays a major role especially in small companies. Remote work brings challenges in many aspects even though they are flexible and give freedom. Challenges can be in keeping up the steady results, promoting responsibility, and encouraging employee engagement (Flores, 2019). In remote teams, maintaining productivity and performance requires a critical evaluation of traditional strategies for leaders. Moreover, leaders must accept modern performance standards that fit to remote work settings.

When monitoring the performance and engagement of team members in remote teams, it is very challenging and difficult since there is no recognition or presence. Casual chats and physical interactions make it easier for managers to evaluate the progress and engagement in traditional office settings. On the other hand, leaders in remote teams must depend on digital platforms and personal reporting. But these may not always indicate the real productivity and output. Moreover,

leaders shall not micromanage or provide insufficient oversight can lead to stress or lack of motivation, especially when the team members feel excluded or neglected. Furthermore, performance and productivity can be slowed down by personal responsibilities, household distractions, and a lack of clear work-life boundaries. According to Flores (2019), employees in remote teams face challenges in maintaining an organized schedule because working from home makes them feel like it's still their personal lives. This leads to screen fatigue, delay, or work overload. This can be found especially in small companies since the team members may need to multitask, so it puts pressure on them. Productivity can decrease only if the employees just log in without a structured plan for priority lists and evaluating performance.

To solve these problems in managing the performance of the employees, leaders must use methods that focus on the specific outcomes or results. In remote teams, effective leadership highlights the results and output instead of focusing on how many hours they are online or working. Digital tools such as Jira and Asana help keep track of the development of projects with transparency within remote teams (Zafer and Roslind, 2020). To support responsibility and boost performance, well-defined goals, continuous feedback, and weekly updates are essential. Moreover, it is essential to build a workplace that values trust and self-direction. According to Buła, Thompson and Żak (2024), when employees in remote teams are enabled to make decisions and handle their own agenda within shared guidelines, they carry out tasks better. This independence improves self-motivation and enables team members to refine their performance and productivity based on individual schedules and different time zones. Leaders can reduce stress, burnout and support consistent productivity by encouraging flexibility and setting clear goals for the teams.

Another critical strategy is investing in digital skills and workplace wellness. Employees can perform better with high productivity and workplace fulfillment if they receive training and workshops for digital skills and efficient task coordination. Streamlined support systems such as well-being conversations, training for productivity, or mutual support systems can be implemented in small companies with limited budgets. They are for supporting team spirit and reducing workflow slowdowns.

Leaders of the remote teams in small companies must balance standards with adaptability, people-centered results, and trust-based supervision to sustain productivity. Remote work settings introduce innovation in management strategies even though they have obstacles in monitoring

performance traditionally. Leaders in global remote teams can achieve productivity and goals by using digital technologies, encouraging self-management and prioritizing staff well-being.

## 2.6 Research Gap

The current literature review delivers a strong insight into the management of remote teams with a specific focus on areas such as communication barriers, tracking productivity, cross-time zone scheduling, and multiculturalism. Nonetheless, most of the research has been strongly focused only on large corporations and multinational organizations that have sufficient resources, advanced technology, budget, and employees. Extending the scope of empirical research from large corporations, a recent study reveals that hybrid work, which combines on-site and work-from-home days, can offer significant benefits without diminishing performance. An investigation at Trip.com, which has 1,612 employees, discovered that hybrid work made people happier at work and reduced the rate of workforce attrition by about one-third (Bloom et al., 2024). It did not affect promotions, performance, or program output over two years (Bloom et al., 2024). Supporting this, market-level analysis across 61 US sectors reveals that a one-percentage-point rise in remote work relates to a 0.08 to 0.09 percentage point increase in total factor productivity (US BLS, 2024). Small companies with limited resources can creatively employ these findings by adopting hybrid models. It may elevate the rate of employee retention, enhance engagement, and gain efficiency. However, small companies are neglected in research and studies of leadership in remote teams, although they are also part of the international business environment (Zafer and Roslind, 2020).

Since the operation systems and resources are different in small companies, enterprise-level HR reforms and corporate-scale digital platforms that are focused on by many experimental studies are not suitable. For example, many researchers have analyzed that remote teamwork is strengthened by using enterprise resource planning (ERP) or real-time performance dashboards. But they are not suitable for small companies because of the cost or they are complicated. Likewise, literature focusing on cultural differences in management aims for the diversity-focused leaders or well-organized and huge HR teams. Small companies usually do not have these departments or teams (Andrea et al., 2022).

No equity-centered analysis is another apparent gap in the existing research. Primary studies have analyzed challenges in different time zones and communication. But just a few studies have aggregated these factors to understand their long-term impact on leadership in remote teams in small companies. This fragmented approach restricts us from understanding how these elements work. But in the real world, multiple obstacles or challenges are happening at the same time. Moreover, leadership theories such as empowering leadership, remote leadership, and ethical leadership are more often reported. But there is insufficient research about how these theories work or impact the operational leadership strategies in remote teams in small companies. Leaders in small companies usually handle multifaceted roles without traditional support systems. However, most existing structures do not address the informal and complex role profile of leadership.

To analyze these gaps, this dissertation focuses on leaders managing remote teams in small companies by undertaking qualitative research. It will investigate how the leaders of small companies manage interrelated obstacles such as communication, the impact of different time zones, productivity and cultural differences through thematic analysis of interviews. This research aims to give situational insights and practical leadership approaches specialized for small companies in the international remote environment.

## 3. Research Questions

What are the major challenges leaders face when managing remote teams? What are the key leadership practices that contribute to successful remote team management in small companies?

### 3.1 Aim and Objectives

This study explores the challenges and practices of leaders navigating communication, diverse cultures, time zones, and productivity in small companies. It aims to provide practical and effective remote leadership strategies.

The objectives of this study are

- To analyze communication strategies for leaders in small remote teams
- To examine the approaches leaders used to manage and lessen time zone differences
- To observe leadership practices for encouraging inclusivity and engaging cultural diversity
- To indicate strategies for monitoring productivity and maintaining team performance
- To evaluate the value of empathy and empowerment in remote leadership in a small company

## 4. Methodology

### 4.1 Research Design

This section summarizes the methodological approach implemented to analyze the challenges and practices faced by remote team leaders in small companies. The objective is to investigate challenges and experiences of remote team leaders with a detailed focus on communication, the impact of different time zones, cultural differences and productivity. As this study takes an exploratory approach, the most appropriate method to gather in-depth qualitative data is a qualitative research design (Creswell, 2007). This section examines the research design, sampling methodology, empirical data collection and method of analysis, ethical principles and research limitations.

To give a broad insight into the interviewees' experiences and points of view, a qualitative research method is appropriate to use. This method is relevant especially for representing multilayered social dynamics. The qualitative approach allowed the researcher to observe the individual experiences of each participant and explore deep insights through analysis. Qualitative research is not only about collecting data but also about understanding from the angle of the participants' perspective (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). Instead of measuring outcomes or assuming causal links, this study focused on examining leadership behavior that additionally validated the qualitative approach. For example, managing a remote team where circumstances and understanding are major factors (Creswell, 2007).

This study was designed to take an exploratory approach since there is a limitation of existing research on remote team leadership challenges and practices in small to medium-sized companies after the pandemic. This research is suitable when exploring theoretically neglected or emerging areas of concern (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2019). Leadership in remote settings becomes an evolving area of study with a lot of unresolved questions. It includes how leaders handle the issues due to geographical distance and different cultures and manage using digital tools.

This study's main data collection technique involved semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews synthesize a fixed thematic framework with the flexibility to observe evolving issues (Ruslin et al., 2022). It is a non-restrictive yet analytical approach. This method cultivates a contextual and participant-oriented approach. That allows leaders to further develop their

challenges, practices in particular social and cultural environments. This format delivers a mix of structuring the conversation with pre-formulated questions and enabling participants to respond freely based on their experiences and opinions. This approach supports openness and nuanced understanding which are important for analyzing leadership practices in managing a remote team.

A broad interpretivist and constructivist research philosophy coincides with these interviews. It suggests that reality is shaped by social norms, and meaning is constructed by reciprocal communication and understanding (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022). Researchers and participants build mutual understanding together with dialogue to enable personal perspective and self-reflection. This is the key focus of reliable qualitative research.

According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis was chosen as the analytical method to highlight recurring elements and key themes within the data. It uncovers the recurring structures of participants' narratives. It allowed the researcher to observe in depth and socially situated experiences. Moreover, it revealed meaningful themes from the realities of participants' situations.

## 4.2 Participants

Five participants were included in this study. All participants are currently working as team leaders or managers in remote teams and they were selected based on their leadership roles in small companies that operate fully remote settings. These individuals revealed different industries including marketing, UX/UI design, software development, and Artificial Intelligence. Data was enhanced by the incorporation of leaders from varied industries with different remote leadership experiences.

### 4.2.1 Sample Size

Five participants were included in the sample which is a relevant number for a qualitative thematic analysis. It values depth more than quantity. In qualitative interviews, data saturation can be attained within six interviews when the sample is demographically consistent group (Guest et al, 2006). This study did not intend for transferability but aimed for a deep understanding.

All participants had experience in managing remote teams for at least two to three years in small companies that have fewer than 50 employees. Those working in traditional office environments or not in managerial positions were excluded. Participants were from different cultural

backgrounds, such as Asia, Southeast Asia, South America and Central Europe. Participants' ages were between 27 and 41 and there was a gender balance (4 female, 1 male). The diversity in the work environment and culture facilitated the aim of the study, which is to reveal the organizational and cultural interactions affect the challenges in remote leadership. Even in interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), a homogeneous group that has a common experience, such as leadership in a remote team, is adequate for deep understanding (Smith et al, 2022).

**Tabel 4.2.2 Participant Demographic Table**

Participant	Gender	Age	Country/Culture	Industry	Managerial Role
P1	Female	27	Czech Republic	AI agents	Team Lead (Operations)
P2	Female	41	South Korea	UX/UI design	Team lead (design)
P3	Female	29	Vietnam	Creative Marketing	Project Manager
P4	Female	40	Myanmar	Software Dev	VP (product and technology)
P5	Male	30	Argentina	Software Dev	Team lead (software dev)

The research used purposive sampling which is a non-probability technique and broadly accepted in qualitative research (Etikan et al., 2016). This enables researchers to intentionally choose participants with experiences and comprehension related to the research questions. Purposive sampling that was used in this study assured that all participants were directly involved in remote team management. Thus, it provided nuanced and lived experiences about the research area.

A pilot interview was not conducted. However, the first participant's interview was used as an informal assessment of the interview format. After this first session, a small wording modification was made but there were no changes in the question structure. In qualitative research, informal piloting is frequently used to enable precision and interview flow (Turner, 2010).

### 4.3 Data Collection

In this study, data were collected through one-to-one semi-structured interviews with five participants in remote teams. This method provides both adaptability and structure and enables the researcher to analyze well-specified themes. At the same time, it also allows participants to explain their distinct experiences (Gill et al., 2008). In leadership studies, semi-structured interviews are impactful as they cultivate trust, reflective discussion and thematic depth (Smith et al., 2022).

Participants were selected externally through referrals and LinkedIn. A digital invitation to a participant (Appendix A) and a participant information sheet (Appendix B) were delivered to individuals in leadership positions. Those who were interested were sent an email with a consent form (Appendix C) highlighting the aim of the study, privacy and data protection, and participant autonomy. Before interviews were scheduled, participants were encouraged to ask questions.

All interviews were executed online via Microsoft Teams or Zoom and were recorded only as audio with recording tools on the platform. Participants were informed to conduct online interviews by both practical and moral considerations. Since all participants were in different parts of the world and time zones, conducting in-person interviews was not realistic. In addition, research has shown that online interviews allow participants to speak comfortably from their place, enable broadened access, and are more cost-efficient (Archibald et al., 2019). The duration of interviews was from 20 to 25 minutes. It varied depending on the richness and nuance of the participants' responses. Using online for interviews was flexible in planning and scheduling. It is helpful to engage with leaders in managerial positions in remote teams across the world (Deakin and Wakefield, 2013).

The interviews were recorded using the feature of audio recording in Microsoft Teams or Zoom. Due to the ethical concerns, participants did not want to be recorded on video. Thus, audio only was recorded. Voice-only recording is able to capture precise tone and allows the freedom and comfort of participants (Sullivan, 2012). Due to data protection and confidentiality, files were safely stored in a password-protected folder on the university OneDrive account of the researcher. Main topics included challenges in communication, time zone differences, different cultural backgrounds, productivity and performance monitoring, and leadership strategies. As the

interviews allowed flexibility, participants could reflect on their real experiences in managing remote teams and deep dive into emergent issues.

## **4.4 Data Analysis**

This study used thematic analysis as guided by Braun and Clarke (2006). In qualitative research, it is a broadly used method to analyze, identify, and understand recurring themes within written data. Due to the compatibility and flexibility of analyzing the real experiences of participants, thematic analysis was chosen especially in relational contexts as leadership in remote team. Its exploratory approach allows the data to explain itself. Thus, it is highly appropriate for studies anchored in constructivist or interpretivist paradigms (Nowell et al., 2017).

According to Braun and Clarke (2006), this study followed six phases of reflexive thematic analysis.

### **1.Familiarisation with the data**

To fully understand the data, transcripts were read several times. Initial observations and notes were made, and emerging ideas began to develop. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), this early stage enables the researcher to start the process of data analysis. It is essential for the systematic process of theme refinement.

### **2.Generating initial codes**

To extract significant elements related to the questions, important fragments of texts were systematically coded in Microsoft Word using comment features and highlighting. Related to the research questions, the codes revealed critical elements such as communication challenges, diverse cultural backgrounds, and leadership practices. Coding was grounded in observed data instead of conceptually derived from existing frameworks.

### **3. Searching for themes**

Codes were categorized into emerging themes that reflected recurring patterns or important topics. To identify repetitive challenges and leadership practices, the codes were analyzed in transcripts side by side. Codes such as “delays in feedback due to time zones”, “empowering autonomy with support”, and “outcome-focused productivity” started grouping thematically.

### **4. Reviewing themes**

Themes were clarified or filtered out based on the representation of the entire data set and coded data. It established both internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity. Some preliminary themes were expanded, merged, or removed if they did not have enough support. This was helpful in clarifying the focal point of each theme. And it verified they were clearly defined and insightful.

### **5. Defining and naming themes**

Each theme was characterized to express its key idea and represent a main concern in managing remote teams. Themes were clarified and supported by participants’ insightful statements. It helped to connect the raw data and research objectives. According to that, finalized themes included: Digital Platform Reliance, Managing Time Zone Differences, Leading Across Cultural and Communication Practices, Monitoring Productivity and Work Visibility, and Empathetic and Empowering Leadership.

### **6. Producing the report**

A narrative interpretation of participants’ experiences was formed by locating the themes within prior literature. Participants’ original words were used to refine clarity and accuracy. This final phase is where the analysis becomes rich and insightful by revealing how findings support deepening understanding.

## **4.5 Ethical Considerations**

When human participants are included in qualitative research, ethical considerations construct a fundamental foundation. This study complied with systematic ethical standards to grant self-direction in shaping the discussion, safety, and respect of all individuals who participated.

### **4.5.1 Ethical Approval**

Ethical approval was formally acquired from the National College of Ireland Research Ethics Committee in advance of the beginning of the study. This is granted that the research design met the standards of the institutional and academic for ethical accountability (Resnik, 2018).

### **4.5.2 Participant Safety**

Safety of the participant was critical to ethical compliance. Throughout the interviews, conditions were established for emotional safety. Assistance resources were also provided at the end of each interview. Studies emphasise that the safety and well-being of participants in qualitative research include not only reducing risk but also sustaining ethical mindfulness (Orb et al., 2001).

### **4.5.3 Consent Form and Right to Withdraw**

Before taking the interviews, participants received a consent form with detailed information. It defines the nature of the study, willingness to participate, and freedom to withdraw at any stage. Both orally and in written form, consent was obtained. In social science research, granting autonomy through an informed consent form fits with ethical commitments to respect and justice (Tracy, 2010). Participants were informed that discontinuing their involvement after interviews was also reasonable.

#### **4.5.4 Confidentiality**

In transcripts, all personal detail information were omitted to preserve anonymity and all identifying names were replaced with pseudonyms. No company names were recorded in the audio files. Confidentiality was secured by safely storing data and restricting access to the researcher only (Orb et al., 2001). Transcripts were securely stored with password authentication.

#### **4.5.5 Data Storage**

Audio files were kept temporarily and deleted instantly after transcribing. According to the General Data Protection Regulation (2016) and the Data Protection Act (2018), transcripts were de-identified and stored safely in an encrypted folder. Participants were notified of the usage of their data, the duration of the data storage, and who would be authorized to access it.

#### **4.5.6 Interviewing**

The researcher had no professional or personal connections with any of the participants. It minimised the participants' sense of obligation or potential disparities in power. Interviewing known individuals may affect honesty and authenticity, in addition to introducing ethical challenges (McConnell et al., 2010). The study avoided these risks by keeping a non-associated participant group.

#### **4.5.7 Mandatory Disclosure and Debriefing**

Before the interview, participants were informed that if any statements potentially harmed to each individual or others, the researcher was under a legal obligation to report it. This process is aligned with the ethical principles (Punch, 2005). It showed that protecting participants' well-being was the researcher's responsibility. Interviews were completed with a summary of the study and contact information for support and assistance.

#### **4.5.8 Reflexivity**

To record emotional reflections, presumptions, and analytical judgments through data collection and investigation, a reflexive research journal was sustained. Reflexivity is the center of maintaining qualitative reliability. It helps to reduce researcher bias and recognize the influence of the researcher on outcomes (Mays and Pope, 2000). Clear reporting of reflexive decisions also secured ethical responsibility.

### **4.6 Reflexivity**

In qualitative research, reflexivity is fundamental to quality assurance. It notes the researcher's active role in guiding the research approach and results. Reflexivity contains ongoing self-awareness of the potential impact of the researcher's perspective, supposition, and lived experience on the explanation and data reporting (Mays and Pope, 2000). I intended to maintain this standard by reflecting on how my beliefs, lived experiences, and positionality might have affected the research at multiple phases while undertaking this study.

I was attentive to my situated perspective across all stages of the analysis and interviews. Being aware of the topic of leadership in remote management, I was influenced by certain assumptions about challenges such as miscommunication and misalignment. But I critically examined these assumptions during data analysis according to the guidance of Mays and Pope (2000). It ensured that any pre-existing assumptions were not favored over participants' authentic words.

Reflexivity is quite challenging and it needs intentional action (Smith et al., 2009). To validate this, I kept a self-reflective journal during the analysis. Also, recording my opinions and thinking after conducting interviews and during theme refinement. This helped me to be aware of potential bias and make sure that the analysis was made only from the data. I also considered how my personal experiences and positionality might have an impact on the interviews. Researchers with good intentions must be mindful of their influence on interpretation (Smith et al., 2009). This

guided me to approach this study with attentive listening, openness and neutral observation. Reflexivity allowed me to keep research ethics and transparency which strengthened the credibility of this qualitative research.

## 5. Results Chapter

**Tabel 5 Summary of Final Themes from Thematic Analysis**

Theme No.	Theme Title	Subtheme	Key Ideas Covered	Participants
1	Digital Platform Reliance	1.1 Communication Overload 1.2 Transparency	Async tools, miscommunication, over/under-communication Shared Documentation	All
2	Managing Time Zone Differences	2.1 Challenges 2.2 Solutions	Delays, scheduling conflicts, Time zone strategies	All
3	Leading Cross-Cultural and Communication Practices		Feedback tone, cultural norms, language barriers	3, 4, 5
4	Monitoring Productivity and Work Visibility		Task tools, sprint goals, blockers, shared tracking systems	All
5	Empathetic and Empowering Leadership	5.1 Connection vs Disconnection 5.2 Decision Making 5.3 Burnout	Empathy, motivation, casual check-ins Trust, autonomy Acknowledge well-being	All

## 5.1 Theme 1: Digital Platform Reliance

### 5.1.1 Communication Overload

In any high-performing team, constructive communication is the essential component. However, it becomes more complicated and crucial in remote work settings. Based on the interviews, communication is stated as one of the most challenging and ongoing difficulties in leading remote working teams by all five participants. A communication challenge emerges from the absence of in-person interaction. Moreover, it also comes from the excessive reliance on digital platforms, the lack of body language and offline messaging. Leaders are needed to make sure that team members are regularly guided, harmonized and linked but not making them feel overburdened by balancing transparency, regularity and use of tools. Participant 1 identified that conflict by saying "*The biggest challenge is probably the asynchronous communication because I am actually the only person in the company who is that far in Asia. I'm seven hours different from them so that's the biggest complication like the delays in communication*". The answer of participant 1 reflects the combined weight of different time zones and asynchronous messaging. Both create delays in feedback and miscommunications.

Based on the interviews, leaders stated that they mostly use digital tools like Asana, Jira, Slack and Teams to manage their teams and workload, and to communicate. But many leaders explained that using too many tools can lead the communication fatigue. Participant 2 expressed this experience as "*overly communicate...Slack messages, quick voice calls, video calls, leaving comments on Jira boards, Figma...even sending a Thumbs up emoji can be the simplest way to respond to let your coworkers know that you're following up on what they are working on*". Based on this answer, digital gestures like emojis can even add warmth and friendliness in remote work environments. It somehow works in place of body language.

### 5.1.2 Transparency

Transparency in communication has become an ongoing priority. Participant 2 identified that “*Communication should be always as clear as possible....each member shall be encouraged to have their voice equally*”. Throughout the interviews, it reflected the central focus on equitable participation, clear communication and attentive and responsive listening especially in remote teams in different cultures and time zones. Most of the leaders stated that vagueness or lack of clarity in written communication often became to overlap in tasks or delays particularly where procedures were misread. Leaders employed multiple strategies to solve these difficulties. Using asynchronous video tools like Loom is a common practice. It allows leaders to record instructions, guidelines and explanations. These tools are useful in connection the gaps in communication especially for complicated or visual tasks. Moreover, it was commonly observed that written documentation was important to avoid disconnection in remote teams. Participant 4 explained “*We also document things and share updates regularly to avoid any confusion later*”.

Notably, there was friction between formal communication and casual chats. Participant 5 expressed, “*The writing can cause a lot of misunderstanding. Sometimes the tone doesn't come across well in writing messages.*” Formal communication, such as daily updates and comments on Asana, was important for transparency in work tasks. However, casual chats like using emojis or short voice messages kept the team feeling warm, harmonized and connected with each other. Leaders had to balance operational performance and emotional intelligence. This theme shows that leaders in remote teams must be thoughtful in their communication. The tone and usage of words when communicating through digital tools like messaging can influence building trust, performance and team harmony. Participant 5 suggested, “*Don't underestimate how much a friendly message or short call can help to be very clear and communicate better.*” Overload communication and a lack of clarity can emerge if it is not managed well. Moreover, it can reduce the team members’ engagement and enhance disconnection in the team. Thus, remote leaders must develop structured and informal communication to avoid misunderstanding and give warmth to maintain team harmony.

## 5.2 Theme 2: Managing Time Zone Differences

### 5.2.1 Challenges

All five participants experienced the challenge due to differences in time zones. Regardless of the size of the team, leaders faced the same situations. Remote work presents complications in managing across different time zones even though it provides the benefits of reaching talents globally. Leaders stated that collaboration, planning, and problem-solving were hugely affected by time zone differences. When their teams operate across multiple continents, no common working hours lead to miscommunication, delays in response time, and feelings of isolation between team members. As participant 3 mentioned, *“Timezone..sometimes we need urgent answers, but our teammates are still asleep in another part of the world”*. Leaders frequently encountered this challenge in remote work settings. The urgent need to make a decision was delayed because of time zone differences. When teams operate in more than two different time zones, it would be difficult to make a plan for real-time meetings with mutually convenient times and it can intensify this conflict. Participant 2 stated that the company implemented a common working hours, *“We ask everyone to be online over the same working hours, but with a bit of reasonable flexibility in a reasonable level”*. This coherent framework sometimes needed team members to work late at night or early morning. It could face conflicts when it comes to work-life balance.

### 5.2.2 Solutions

Leaders used several flexible approaches to handle this conflict. Participant 5 mentioned the approach, which is managing to have overlap hours, *“I set a clear list of priorities and I try to have a few overlap hours... We also use async tools like Docs, Tasks, and Task Board”*. Leaders intended to increase productivity during common working hours by creating a small window of time every day so that the most important decisions and exchanges could be made. Moreover, without real-time communication, asynchronous tools were essential in encouraging teamwork. Participant 4 explained the team avoided having meetings at fixed times and relied on asynchronous tools for updates *“We try to work in a way that doesn’t always require everyone to be online at the same*

*time. Most of our updates and tasks are shared through emails, teams, etc., so people can check and respond when they're online."*

Regardless of these approaches and strategies, time zone differences still remained and affected significant areas like authorizations, decision-making, group-based problem solving, and back-and-forth feedback. Participant 4 expressed, "*The biggest issue is that decisions can be delayed or work can get stuck if the right people aren't available.*" This shows that time zone differences affect planning. Moreover, it also impacts receptiveness, independence, and flow of task performance.

Notably, time zone differences were viewed as a different pathway to create "handing off tasks across time zones" workflows by some leaders. It means team members can work at their convenience. But this type of model needs comprehensive written records, harmonized operations across regions, and most importantly, a solid foundation of trust. Time zone differences are not only a coordination challenge but also a structure and momentum of teamwork in a remote setting. Even though a perfect strategy may be impossible, leaders must plan the best ways to communicate, use asynchronous tools, and expect the most realistic outcomes.

### **5.3 Theme 3: Leading Cross-Cultural and Communication Practices**

Cultural differences have arisen as a major challenge in leadership since remote teams become global. In this study, participants stated that communication styles, performance standards, and workplace dynamics are affected by cultural norms. For some leaders, cultural differences are a strength for a team. All leaders recognized that it required purposeful action and empathy to analyze these differences.

Communication challenges in different cultures were obvious in tone, usage of words, feedback, and explanation. Participant 3, who is a creative project manager of a remote team with members from West and Southeast Asia, explained, "*I used to have a manager from West. It was quite hard to explain the Southeast Asian culture and the references to him. Some ideas that seemed relatable to him didn't work well for our markets, and vice versa.*" This shows thematic repetition across

the interviews. It explains that cultural differences can lead to misunderstanding of messages especially between the politeness and straightforwardness. Participant 4 also explained about the conflict due to the style of giving feedback: “*We've encountered occasional misalignment in feedback styles. Some team members prefer direct, candid feedback, while others interpret it as harsh and take it personally.*” In culturally diverse teams, it may sound harshly worded or blunt in an environment even though it may be viewed as direct and honest in another. Thus, leaders must balance cultural sensitivity and clarity.

Regardless of these conflicts, all participants maintained the capacity to adjust in leadership practices. Participant 5 explained a situation where misinterpretation was mistaken as misunderstanding because of different culture: “*There was some misunderstanding about how feedback was being given from one developer to another...I talked to both sides...I helped them to see it was just different styles...we set some friendly team norms for communication.*” The leader managed to reduce conflicts and helped build mutual understanding between the team members by supporting open communication and creating interactional norms. Participant 1 explained about their team culture, which did not have any issues due to the same cultural background: “*We don't face many cultural differences cause we're all Czech...but with the guys from the States, sometimes it's a little bit difficult because their style is a bit different.*” Even though most of their team members share a similar cultural background, minor variations in work culture or communication style can still affect teamwork.

Language skill was also mentioned as an important thing by leaders. The common language in all teams was English. However, it was a second language for many members who were not native speakers. Due to this, more challenges occurred when it came to written communication and presentation. Participant 5 defined that “*We are a multicultural team, we have people from all around the globe...English is the second language. I always try to explain things clearly in meetings, usually with a short talk or presentation to keep everyone 100% aware.*” Providing real-time elaboration helped to overcome the language-related obstacles.

All participants highlighted transparency, empathy, and creating a supportive safe space to successfully lead a remote team across cultures. They practiced clear communication, casual check-ins, friendliness, and warmth to build the connection with the team members and harmonize the teamwork. Cultural differences in remote teams are not only a challenge but also a new

prospect to encourage leaders to establish flexible, welcoming and equitable leadership practices. The major fact is to notice the differences in the early stage, communicate openly, and create mutual expectations and collective values that all team members can get involved.

## **5.4 Theme 4: Monitoring Productivity and Work Visibility**

Due to the lack of in-person presence, sustaining visibility in each progress and productivity grows into a significant challenge in remote work settings. All participants emphasized that structured and informal communication were important. They were used to track the team performance and productivity, and harmonize with the goals of the team. In remote teams, they also supported that productivity should not be judged only by working hours but by results and outcomes. It shows a new perspective in leadership that reflects outcome focused. Participant 1 stated that *“We use clearly defined KPIs and weekly task reviews to track progress.....and I focus more on outcomes than hours logged.”* This approach was also reflected in other interviews. Particularly in remote work settings, participants explained that micromanagement is unfeasible and discouraging for team members. Participant 4 expressed, *“Most importantly, do not micromanage and trust your team. Micromanaging can reduce team engagement.”* In contrast, the priority is setting clear goals and expectations and allowing transparency over tasks and outputs.

Most participants stated that project management tools helped track asynchronous progress, work distribution and revised deadlines. They are critical in remote teams. Participant 2 described, *“We also have daily catch-up every day within each project team at the same time to share the work progress of each, and use Jira board to follow up and share the process.”* This encourages decision-making freedom and taking responsibility. Leaders trust their team members’ ability to manage their workload and time. And report to the whole team at the same time.

But tools alone could not solve all the challenges. Many participants stated that they had difficulties recognizing the struggles of a team member in silence when the person disconnected or faced an obstacle but did not inform them. Participant 5 mentioned that *“Some people tend to be very quiet about their progress and take the whole task in silence...I encourage regular small updates, at least one-line chat.”* This shows that leaders need to create a safe space for team members to share

their obstacles and difficulties without being judged while also following their progress. Participant 4 highlighted the balance between trust and management: “*I make sure to have regular one-on-one meetings and chats, check in on how people are doing personally....Remote work works best when everyone does their part without being watched all the time.*” This synchronizes with broader evolution in leadership practices. It encourages team members and makes check-ins to ensure visibility and adaptability.

Furthermore, leaders explained that productivity was measured not only by outcomes but also by how a team member acted in collaboration and communication. Participant 5 stated: “*I focus not only on the output, but also how the person collaborates and helps the team and how it communicates....I prefer clear communication on the status rather than just working in silence.*” This shows that productivity includes both self efficiency and team cohesion in remote teams. Thus, tracking productivity in remote teams is a complex task. Effective leadership needs to create a work environment which includes supportiveness, openness, and joint accountability, while digital tools deliver transparency and framework.

## **5.5 Theme 5: Empathetic and Empowering Leadership**

### **5.5.1 Connection vs Disconnection**

Empathetic and Empowering Leadership in remote work environments is the final theme that emerged significantly across all interviews. All participants explained that emotional intelligence, understanding, warmth, and support are essential in remote teams when creating effective leadership traits. They are different from traditional approaches. Leaders must build trust in the team and support team members due to the lack of physical interaction or visibility. Participant 5 explained connecting on an emotional level in leadership is required: “*I always try to break the ice during technical meetings with some casual chat, sports, traveling, etc. ...I try to connect with each person, not just as a developer but also as a teammate.*” This shows a broader change to visionary leadership. Casual check-ins and emotional security are more than just fill-ins but essential in remote teams.

Participants explained how remote work settings can make team members struggle with social disconnection. Moreover, it can decrease opportunities for social exchanges among colleagues and it can make it difficult to build a bond. All participants leaned on casual check-ins, one-on-one meetings, and group routines where everyone could share their experiences. Participant 3 described “*We had something called Creative Town Hall. Everyone would share their works, why they loved it, and how it motivated them. It helped everyone connect, express their individuality, and see each other as more than just coworkers.*” These small group routines created the bond in remote teams and encouraged team members.

### **5.5.2 Decision-Making**

Decision-making freedom was another key factor across all interviews. Participant 5 stated “*I give autonomy, but I am always available if they need me.*” Participant 4 also explained “*I help the team by clearing any problems they run into, but also let them take charge of their own work.*” This reflects empowering leadership which means not ignoring team members’ work or progress but allowing them to make decisions. It also helps them recognize their collaborations and create space for adaptability. This leadership approach encourages accountability, creativity and motivation. For equitable participation in remote teams, leaders explained that all voices were heard equally. Especially in remote teams with different time zones, cultural backgrounds, and managerial levels, this is critical. Participant 3 remarked: “*I would say ‘listening’. To truly understand what environment helps each team member develop. If people love what they do and feel understood, they will do great work.*” This shows an understanding of different communication approaches and equal participation.

### **5.5.3 Burnout**

Challenges such as noticing disconnection or burnout when there are no visual cues were also mentioned by participants. Participant 5 stated: “*It's very important to know if the person is blocked or burned out, but it's very clear about it and communicates well. That is way more important than just doing a lot of work.*” This initiative driven approach allows leaders to acknowledge wellness concerns and help with empathy. This reflects that remote team leaders must be understanding,

thoughtful and people-focused. It is undeniable that digital tools and performance indicators are fundamental in managing remote teams. However, empathy and human-centered leadership are more critical. It includes building trust through online communication, listening mindfully, and supporting with appreciation without judging or controlling.

To successfully manage remote teams, it depends on the work process and technology. Moreover, it depends on the relational side of the leader in connection with team members. Empathetic and Empowering Leadership helps build a space to make a person feel heard, seen, appreciated, and motivated. This turns into emotional closeness in remote teams.

## 6. Discussion

### 6.1 Key Findings

This study investigated the real experiences of remote team leaders in small companies. Five main themes were highlighted by thematic analysis of the interviews: (1) Digital Platform Reliance (2) Managing Time Zone Differences (3) Leading Cross-Cultural and Communication Practices (4) Monitoring Productivity and Visibility (5) Empathetic and Empowering Leadership. These themes connect with the existing literature, at the same time, they highlight new elements particularly in small organizations.

The results support and develop the theoretical frameworks and empirical outcomes that were analyzed in the literature. Aligning with the e-leadership theory of Avolio et al. (2000), the findings reveal that communicating through digital tools and platforms is fundamental but needs to be mindfully applied not to communicate overly which can lead to confusion. Participants highlighted the importance of the balance between emotional and practical when using asynchronous tools. Tools such as Slack, Jira, and Asana support operational planning (Zafer and Roslind, 2020). However, overuse of these asynchronous tools can lead to emotional exhaustion and burnout (Flores, 2019). Casual chats and even adding emojis in texts or comments added warmth in the absence of in-person interaction. It reflects emotional depth are often neglected in technical leadership frameworks (Steenkamp and Dhanesh, 2023).

Nonetheless, a fresh perspective has arisen regarding to digital burnout. Leaders reflected on the concern that was not only about tool fatigue but also about the emotional stress due to the excessive use of digital platforms. Large organizations have refined administrative structures or communication officers. Small companies operate differently. Leaders in small companies struggled to balance clarity and the emotional well-being of the team. This subtle issue has not been discovered enough. This contributes to a better understanding of communication in small remote teams.

In both the literature and results chapter, time zone differences were highlighted. It had emotional and functional implications. Leaders struggled with delays in decision-making and response time. Reflecting Steenkamp and Dhanesh's (2023) statement, communication using asynchronous tools

needs empathy and structured planning. Leaders aimed to create overlapping working hours and construct flexible working styles. It validated Zafer and Roslind's (2020) argument that planning adaptability and flexibility is critical in geographically distributed small teams. Social consequences of time zone differences set this study apart. Beyond practical concerns, participants expressed that time zone barriers affected trust, team cohesion, and emotional closeness. Notably, when immediate action was required to make decisions in geographically diverse teams. Steenkamp and Dhanesh (2023) briefly mentioned that these human impacts of asynchronous workflows are theoretically overlooked. This study brings a new perspective to understand the effects of emotional labor in managing time zone differences.

A diverse cultural background was considered both a challenge and a possibility. Reflecting Andrea et al. (2022), the study stated that a mismatch in cultural values could cause different tone and structure in feedback approaches. That could lead to conflict and misunderstanding. Leaders responded by encouraging transparency, supporting equitable involvement, and creating norms in communication. Leaders talked about creating communication norms in their teams made this study distinctive. For example, addressing interactional norms, developing shared rules in feedback tone, and communication rhythms became informal. But they are powerful in connecting within culturally diverse teams. This shows a new lens in leadership practice, adaptive interactional norm-creating. That expands more than multicultural awareness by integrating inclusive practices into daily tasks.

Performance and productivity were not measured by working hours. They were defined by communication, collaborative engagement and outcomes. Asynchronous tools such as Asana and Jira were used to track progress. But leaders also regularly checked in to know if there were any struggles or disconnection. These findings match with Bula et al. (2024) observation, productivity and performance grow well when the leadership is based on trust and is result-oriented. However, digital tools can only track progress but they cannot notice disengagement, burnout, or isolation. Hence, the study aligns with existing theory but also offers a new perspective on empathetic visibility. It suggests that leaders in remote teams must support supplementary data with regular check-ins and intuition to keep productivity and well-being.

For effective leadership, empathy and empowerment became a fundamental layer. Participants talked about empathetic connection, acknowledgement, and building emotional safety spaces for

team bonding. These findings develop further empowering and ethical leadership theories by Mafalda (2021). Emotional intelligence is essential for team harmony and sustained productivity in remote work settings. The distinctive fact is that these practices have risen organically. It was not through the Human Resource Policy but through lived experiences and values of the leaders. Due to the lack of organizational support, leaders in small companies often supported as a mentor, project manager, and HR (Human Resource) officer at the same time. This multifunctional role needs more research attention. Moreover, it could reconceptualize leadership in small remote teams.

## **6.2 Implications of the Research**

This study presents several practical implications for remote leadership in small organizations.

### **1. Integrated communication strategy**

Leaders must implement an organised but flexible communication structure. It integrates etiquette in reporting updates with casualness, such as using emojis in comments and casual chats. These support building trust, transparency and emotional closeness (Coppola et al., 2004). Implementing social norms for communication tone within teams and using asynchronous tools for video updates can reduce misunderstandings and conflicts. Moreover, it can also promote participation distributed across time zones.

### **2. Flexible planning and Asynchronous communication**

Time zone organization should be more than planning. It should be developed as a strategic workflow method. Leaders should rotate working hours, asynchronous task flow such as leaving comments on shared assignments, and clearly define expectations about attentiveness. These practices help improve production flow and also encourage equity in individual involvement in culturally diverse teams (Zafer & Roslind, 2020).

### **3. Multiculturally Inclusive Leadership**

Cultural awareness and empathy are must have in leadership practices. Leaders should create cross-cultural sessions and support mutual agreements within teams to define communication norms. This avoids conflict arising from delivery formats. Acknowledging cross-cultural dynamics

in the early stage can turn a possible conflict in the future into an advantage in team collaboration (Steenkamp and Dhanesh, 2023).

#### **4. Results-focused Models**

Instead of logged hours-based monitoring, outcome-focused tracking is fundamental. In remote teams, this shift is more accountable and efficient especially in small companies that have limited resources. Leaders should set clear key performance indicators (KPIs), encourage autonomy with regular check-ins and track progress through digital platforms (Flores, 2019).

#### **5. Emotional Closeness and Empowerment**

Remote team leaders must build emotional bonding within the team early on. Leaders can add a human touch to the digital screen by creating casual team routines such as one-on-one catch-up sessions and personal check-ins. These findings highly support leadership that encourages decision-making. Meanwhile, being emotionally open to the team. This shift matched with ethical and empowering leadership theory by Mafalda (2021).

### **6.3 Strengths and Limitations**

This research used a qualitative methodology with semi-structured online interviews. Five participants were involved and it was followed by thematic analysis. This study presented several strengths while also revealing specific limitations.

#### **6.3.1 Strengths**

##### **Contextual and Rich Data**

Using qualitative semi-structured interviews, participants were allowed to share detailed thoughts and emotional depth. They are often overlooked in qualitative methods. This depth helped document the complications of remote team leadership in small companies.

### **Direct Access to Real Life Experience**

Interviews with the leaders offered experiential insights into leadership strategies, challenges, and emotional nuances. It enhanced the validity and authenticity of the findings.

### **Virtual Format for Data Collection**

With regard to the topic of remote work, conducting interviews online was appropriate in both practical and contextual terms. It allowed flexibility in participation from different locations in the world across time zones. Thus, it reflected constraints in real life that were discussed in the study.

### **Thematic Analysis**

This analytic method was suitable for recognizing patterns and themes in various leadership experiences. It offered both structured and interpretive flexibility. It supported the derivation of key findings that were related to communication, time zones, culture, productivity and empathy.

## **6.3.2 Limitations**

### **Small Sample Size**

Only five participants were involved in the study which restricted contextual extension. Even though the thematic depth was rich and strong, a larger and broader sample may have uncovered more wide-ranging and differential perspectives.

### **Limited Industry Range**

Participants were mainly from the software, AI and design industries. Leaders in different sectors such as manufacturing or healthcare may face different challenges in remote leadership.

### **Homogeneous Structure**

Although conducting all interviews online was relevant to the research topic, it may have limited the capability to discover body language or interpersonal dynamics that could be detected in person.

### **Potential Biases**

Since the data relied on self-disclosed responses, participants may have revealed flawless representations of their leadership strategy, failed to disclose challenges or overstated empowerment and empathy.

### **No Perspectives from Team Members**

The study only focused on the perspectives of leaders. Team members in remote teams might have disclosed misalignments in reported effectiveness or team harmony.

## 6.4 Recommendations for Future Research

### **Perspectives of Team Members**

Future studies should discover the thoughts and opinions of employees. This would help examine whether empowering and empathetic strategies are the same as it interpreted in organizational layers.

### **Sector-Specific Research**

Analyzing remote leadership in different industries with fewer digital systems could reveal different conflicts and modifications.

### **Cultural Adaptation Approach**

How particular cultural norms affect trust, communication or bonding in remote teams could be discovered by using a quantitative method in cross-cultural studies.

### **Long-Term Studies on Burnout and Connection**

Extended studies tracking the leader and the team welfare could reveal distinctive signs of emotional burnout and offer preventive strategies.

### **Equity-Centered Leadership Styles**

Especially in work environments without Human Resources teams, extended studies are required to inquire into how the leaders encourage transparency, fairness and participation across cultures, languages and time zones.

## 7. Conclusion

This study aimed to explore how leaders manage the complex challenges of overseeing remote teams in small companies. It aspired to understand the useful leadership practices and empathic capacity that are needed to address miscommunication, time zone differences, diverse cultures, and productivity issues in remote settings. The findings support a deeper understanding of how remote leadership is reconstructed in geographically dispersed teams within small companies. The research employed a qualitative method with semi-structured online interviews. It allowed a deeper exploration of the lived experiences of the leaders. Thematic analysis uncovered that effective remote leadership is more than expertizing in digital platforms, while technical tools play a major role in teamwork organization. Remote team leaders in small companies must balance friendliness and clarity in communication, encourage equity through different time zones, be aware of cultural differences, and support their teams with no micromanagement. These findings align with and expand on existing theories such as empowering and ethical leadership, and e-leadership.

Notably, the study revealed that remote team leadership in small companies is highly interactive and emotionally aware. Leaders serve multiple roles, such as mentors and supporters, showing that human connection is essential in virtual working environments. This observation supports the literature by focusing on empathy and flexibility as mandatory qualities in remote team leadership. By exploring the original research question: “Remote Leadership Practices and Challenges in Communication, Time Zones, Culture, and Productivity in Small Companies”, the study supports that successful remote leadership is not only about applying traditional office strategies on screen. It is about practices based on trust, equitable participation and emotional intelligence.

This research presents both practical and theoretical benefits. Particularly for small organizations with a shift to remote or hybrid formats. With a limitation on sample size and area of focus, the study offers a foundation to expand it further into emotionally aware leadership practices in different cultures and industries. In conclusion, remote leadership enables to drive of significant transformation when leaders accept the complication of emotional and cultural contexts.

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## 9. Appendices

### Appendix A: Invitation to Participate in Research Study

**Subject:** Invitation to Take Part in a Study on Remote Team Leadership in Small Companies

Dear [Participant Name],

I am inviting you to take part in a research study for my dissertation, which explores the challenges and practices of remote team leaders in small companies. The aim is to gain insight into leadership approaches, communication practices, and strategies for managing teams across different time zones and cultures.

To be eligible, you should:

- Currently hold a managerial role leading a remote team.
- Currently working in a small company with fewer than 50 employees.
- Have experience in managing a remote team for 1 to 2 years.

What will participation involve?

- A semi-structured online interview of around 20 minutes, conducted via video call.
- You will be asked a set of 13 guided questions about your experiences and challenges as a remote team leader.
- Your participation is entirely voluntary, and you may skip any question or withdraw at any time without consequence.

Confidentiality and Data Protection

- All personal and company names will be anonymised (e.g., Participant 1).
- Data will be stored securely and will be accessible only to the researcher and academic supervisor.
- Audio recordings will be transcribed and stored securely; all identifying details will be removed from transcripts.

Ethical Approval

This study has received ethical clearance from [Your Institution Name].

If you are interested in participating or have any questions, please contact me at:

Email: [email address]

Phone: [phone number]

Thank you for considering taking part. Your insights will be invaluable to this research.

Kind regards,  
May Khin Maung Win  
National College of Ireland

## Appendix B: Participant Information Sheet

**Research Title:** Remote Leadership Practices and Challenges in Small Companies: A Qualitative Exploration of Communication, Time Zones, Culture and Productivity

**Researcher:** Researcher Name

**Institution:** Name of the Institution

**Programme:** Name of the programme

**Supervisor:** Supervisor Name

**Email:** Researcher email

### Purpose of the Study

You are invited to take part in a research study for my dissertation, which aims to explore the challenges and practices of remote team leaders in small companies. This study will investigate areas such as communication, managing time zone differences, cultural diversity, and productivity. Your experiences and insights will contribute to a better understanding of leadership in remote work environments, particularly within small organisations.

### Why have I been invited?

You have been invited because you meet the study's participation criteria:

You are in a managerial role leading a remote team.

You work in a company with fewer than 50 employees.

You have 1 to 2 years of experience in remote team management.

### What will I be asked to do?

If you agree to take part, you will:

Participate in a partially structured interview lasting approximately 20 minutes.

Be interviewed via video call; only audio will be recorded.

Answer around 13 guided questions about your experiences and challenges as a remote team leader.

You may skip any question or stop the interview at any time.

### Do I have to take part?

No. Your participation is entirely voluntary. You may withdraw from the study at any time without giving a reason. If you withdraw, any data collected from you will be permanently deleted.

## **Confidentiality and Data Protection**

Your name, company name, and any identifying details will be anonymised (e.g., Participant 1).

Data will be stored securely on password-protected devices and will only be accessible to the researcher and academic supervisor.

Audio recordings will be transcribed, and all identifying information will be removed.

## **Ethical Approval**

This study has been approved by (Institution Name).

## **Possible Risks and Benefits**

Risks: This study involves minimal risk. You may choose not to answer any question that makes you uncomfortable.

Benefits: While there is no direct personal benefit, your insights will contribute to academic knowledge and may inform better leadership practices in remote work.

## **Contact for Questions or Concerns**

If you have any questions about the study, please contact:

Researcher:

Supervisor:

Thank you for taking the time to read this information. Your participation is greatly appreciated.

## Appendix C: Consent Form

### Remote Leadership Practices and Challenges in Small Companies: A Qualitative Exploration of Communication, Time Zones, Culture and Productivity

#### Consent to take part in research

- I ..... voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.
- I understand that even if I agree to participate now, I can withdraw at any time or refuse to answer any question without any consequences of any kind.
- I understand that I can withdraw permission to use data from my interview within two weeks after the interview, in which case the material will be deleted.
- I have had the purpose and nature of the study explained to me in writing and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study.
- I understand that participation involves an online interview.
- I understand that I will not benefit directly from participating in this research.
- I agree to my interview being audio-recorded.
- I understand that all information I provide for this study will be treated confidentially.
- I understand that in any report on the results of this research my identity will remain anonymous.  
This will be done by changing my name and disguising any details of my interview which may reveal my identity or the identity of people I speak about.
- I understand that disguised extracts from my interview may be quoted in dissertation.
- I understand that if I inform the researcher that myself or someone else is at risk of harm they may have to report this to the relevant authorities - they will discuss this with me first but may be required to report with or without my permission.
- I understand that signed consent forms and original audio recordings will be retained in a password-protected folder on the university OneDrive account until the exam board confirms the results of the dissertation.
- I understand that a transcript of my interview in which all identifying information has been

removed will be retained for two years.

- I understand that under freedom of information legalisation I am entitled to access the information I have provided at any time while it is in storage as specified above.
- I understand that I am free to contact any of the people involved in the research to seek further clarification and information.

Names, degrees, affiliations and contact details of researchers (and academic supervisors when relevant).

*Signature of research participant*

### Signature of participant

Date

*Signature of researcher*

I believe the participant is giving informed consent to participate in this study

May Khin Maung Win

Signature of researcher

Date

## Appendix D: Transcript

### **Q. Can you describe your role and responsibilities in your current remote team?**

I am a software developer manager and team lead. I work for a startup and I help plan the task, review the code, support the team, and make sure we stay on track. I also coordinate with stakeholders, I write specs, and keep the team focused and motivated.

### **Q. How long have you been managing a remote team?**

I've been working as a software developer manager about three years, almost three years. I've worked with fully remote teams across different roles and countries, so I've been mostly software developer and team lead, always working fully remote.

### **Q. How many people are in your team?**

Right now, in my team, there are three developers, three software developers, but this changes depending on the project or the sprint. I also work with other teams and coordinate with other software developers, as I said, depending on the project.

### **Q. What are the biggest challenges you face when communicating with your teammates?**

One of the biggest challenges I face when communicating with other teammates is the time zone and the delays. Also, the writing can cause a lot of misunderstanding. Sometimes the tone doesn't come across well in writing messages.

### **Q. How do you solve the problems if you have problems in communication?**

Since we are a multicultural team, we have people from all around the globe. Most of the people don't speak English natively. English is the second language. I always try to explain things clearly in meetings, usually with a short talk or presentation to keep everyone 100% aware. I also encourage people to ask quick questions in the team chat in the app if something is not understood, if it's still unclear. I suggest to make quick questions or I suggest also to have a quick call after the meeting to keep everything 100% clear.

**Q. How do you manage a remote team with people working from different time zones?**

The way I manage a remote team with different working hours is that I set a clear list of priorities and I try to have a few overlap hours. Usually this is like one condition, so we can stay in the same period of time while we mostly try to communicate and have the meetings and plan the test. We also use async tools like Docs, Tasks, and Task Board. We add comments to stay updated even if we are not online at the same time.

**Q. What is the biggest issue due to time zone differences and how do you handle it?**

One of the biggest issues of having different working hours is the waiting for the code reviews or the answers. I try to plan work so it doesn't block others. I encourage sharing early updates so we can move things forward. So, I usually encourage the team to first have a look and not start working right after so we can identify the blockers and we can take the decisions and the planning as soon as possible.

**Q. If you have teammates from different cultural backgrounds, what is the difficult issue you faced because of cultural differences?**

Some people tend to be very quiet about their progress and take the whole task in silence, which is not great. It's not always great because other teammates cannot help or plan well. I try to keep things friendly and encourage regular small updates, at least one-line chat, and also having time for everyone during the stand-up meetings. It's also very important that everyone shares what is blocked or what is next for them.

**Q. Have cultural differences led to a problem between your teammates? How did you resolve it?**

Mostly during the code reviews, so as software developers, we usually have to make a review of someone else's code, so we try to avoid as many issues as possible. So sometimes there was some misunderstanding about how feedback was being given from one developer to another, and there was a big issue about the way they talked to each other. I talked to both sides privately, and I helped them to see it was just different styles. Some people prefer very direct, kind of giving an

order, but it's not an order, it's just the writing style to comment and review. So then we set some friendly team norms for communication, and yeah, that was one case.

**Q. How do you monitor the performance and productivity of your remote team?**

The way I monitor the performance of my team is mostly through sprint goals, the tasks they are doing through our tools, code review. I'm always part of the code review. I have to take a look, so that's a clear way to see their progress. Also, in the daily or the weekly check-ins during the meetings, I focus not only on the output, but also how the person collaborates and helps the team and how it communicates. For me, it's very important to know if the person is blocked or burned out, but it's very clear about it and communicates well. That is way more important than just doing a lot of work. I prefer clear communication on the status rather than just working in silence.

**Q. How do you build relationships and trust with your teammates in remote settings?**

I always try to break the ice during technical meetings with some casual chat, sports, traveling, etc. I also stay available, give honest feedback to them, and I try to connect with each person, not just as a developer but also as a teammate.

**Q. What kind of leadership approaches have worked best for managing a remote team?**

Definitely being clear, organized, and friendly. I give autonomy, but I am always available if they need me. I keep a relaxed tone, but serious and a little bit focused on delivery.

**Q. What advice, if any, would you give to another manager for working effectively and efficiently as a remote team?**

One piece of advice that I would give to another manager is always to keep the communication clear, be very clear about the goal, be also flexible, trust your team, be friendly with your team, encourage to regular updates, create a space where people feel safe to speak honestly, that's very important that they don't just say what you want to hear, so you should make this space so they can speak. Don't underestimate how much a friendly message or short call can help to be very clear and communicate better.