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UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND, JOHANNESBURG

# Experiences of E-Leadership: A Qualitative Study

By

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A research project submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of a Master of Arts in Organisational Psychology in the field of Psychology in the Faculty of Humanities, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, 18th April, 2023.

**Declaration**

I, Chloe Gilchrist, declare that this research report is my own, unaided work. It is submitted for the Master of Arts in Organisational Psychology degree at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination at this or any other university.



Chloe Gilchrist

**Date:** 18th April 2023

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## Abstract

Many leaders' daily work entails practicing leadership in the virtual sphere, yet our understanding of how leadership is enacted in technologically-mediated environments (i.e., e-leadership) is limited. By exploring both leaders' and employees' experiences of e-leadership, this study seeks to acquire a deeper understanding of e-leadership. To achieve this, the research utilised a hermeneutic phenomenological qualitative research approach. The sample for the research comprised of employees and leaders, and a snowball sampling strategy was used to recruit the participants. The interviews used a self-developed questionnaire based on the literature, centred on the participant's subjective meanings, understandings and experiences regarding e-leadership. After the interviews were transcribed, Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was employed to analyse the data. Overall, the key findings indicated that e-leaders need to exert greater effort than traditional leaders in a number of areas, including, establishing and maintaining connection, communication, exposure to knowledge share, trust, engagement and motivation, as well as humanising the work experience (Hertel et al., 2005; Savolainen, 2014; Liu et al., 2018; Van Wart et al., 2017; DasGupta, 2011; Hart & Mcleod, 2003; Kayworth & Leidner 2001). Consequently, merely translating traditional leadership practices into the virtual realm as an e-leader does not suffice.

**Key words**: e-leadership, virtual teams, digitalisation, remote work

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# Chapter 1: Introduction and Scope of Study

## 1.1. Introduction

The digital era represents a shift in organisational processes and routines (Garro-Abarca et al., 2021). Significant technological developments have resulted in a new work paradigm. Work can now be performed anywhere, anytime, in real space or via digital media (Cascio & Shurygalio, 2003). As a result, technology has become an intrinsic component of organisations and, in turn, the leadership domain (Avolio et al., 2001). The term "e-leadership" emerged to describe the type of work environment in which leadership interactions are characterised by digitally mediated communication between geographically dispersed leaders and employees (Avolio et al., 2009; Kelloway et al., 2003; Lilian, 2014). The pervasive use of virtual teams, within which e-leadership operates, is one of the most significant characteristics that digital media has fashioned for organisational life (Gupta & Pathak, 2018). Yet, e-leaders may experience a variety of obstacles when leading virtual teams, such as those related to coordination, knowledge dissemination, and communication (Lilian, 2014). As a result, DasGupta, (2011) argues that e-leaders must acquire the necessary skills to overcome these challenges in order to optimally lead virtual teams, since merely adapting current leadership approaches to e-leadership settings are likely to be inadequate (DasGupta, 2011). Zaccaro and Bader (2003) postulated that e-leadership will become the norm rather than the exception. Yet, research on e-leadership remains scarce since it is still in its "very nascent stages of development" (Avolio et al., 2014, p. 105). Although this assertion by Avolio et al. (2014) was made almost a decade ago, it is still relevant today as additional research in this domain is still needed to gain significant insights to understand its role (Van Wart et al., 2019; Kashive et al., 2022). E-leadership is increasing in many organisations as a result of the accelerated advancement of information and communication technologies (ICTs). Yet, little is understood about this emerging paradigm of e-leadership because specific recommendations and guidelines remain elusive (Avolio et al., 2014; Kashive et al., 2022).

## 1.2. Aim

The aim of this research is to gain a comprehensive understanding of e-leadership by exploring employees' experiences of their leaders leading in the virtual realm as e-leaders as well as leaders' experiences leading in the virtual realm as e-leaders.

### 1.3. Rationale

Technology has become an integral part of organisational social transformation and, as a result, part of the leadership domain (Avolio et al., 2001). The term "e-leadership" was devised to reflect the new working conditions where interactions are mediated by technology, individuals and groups are geographically distributed, and leaders lead from a distance (Avolio et al., 2001; Avolio et al., 2009; Lilian, 2014). Traditional leadership theories, mainly developed for a context different from that emerging in the digital era, have been criticised as "too static, too macro, too political, too conceptually under-developed" (Wilson, 2004, p. 860) for the distributed and complex processes that form the digital world (DasGupta, 2011). Zaccaro and Bader (2003) projects that e-leadership will become the norm rather than the exception as remote working tools have become relatively accessible and inexpensive for organisations, which has enhanced remote working capabilities (Bao et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2021). This is a due to organisations' rapid technological development and increasingly global presence. Yet, despite the growing interest in examining the relationship between leadership and digital technology, research contributions have assembled in a fragmented manner from multiple disciplines. Scholars have struggled to identify broader patterns of change arising from the digital enterprise as a result of this fragmentation (Schwarzmüller et al., 2018; Cortellazzo et al., 2019), which has resulted in conceptual confusion (Gurr, 2006). Although, some broad conclusions regarding e-leadership can be drawn from the literature, more specific recommendations and guidelines remain elusive, as research on e-leadership is limited (Avolio et al., 2014; Tigre et al., 2023).

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the process of teleworking and remote working as many organisations had to adopt these forms of work arrangements as a means of surviving in the context of the pandemic. These recent advances have established a unique organisational paradigm for leaders, therefore changing what it means to be a leader. Thus, e-leadership in this context entails the development of specific competencies to optimise working conditions and organisational performance in virtual work settings (Roman et al., 2019). Although many individuals practice leadership in virtual settings frequently, our knowledge of how to exercise leadership virtually is insufficient (Darics, 2020). Against this backdrop, the identified knowledge gaps pertaining to e-leadership substantiates evaluating and understanding e-leadership experiences from the perspectives of both employees and leaders, in South Africa.

# Chapter 2: Literature Review:

## 2.1. The Digital World

The digital era has signified a shift in the processes and routines of organisations (Garro-Abarca et al., 2021). Significant technological advancements have resulted in a new work paradigm in that work can be conducted anywhere, anytime through technology (Cascio & Shurygalio, 2003; Hambley et al., 2007). Information communication and technology (ICT) has enriched the digital form and has become an integral part of organisations and, as a result, part of the leadership domain (Avolio et al., 2001). Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic has further accelerated this technological transformation, therefore, highlighting the significance in exploring the increasingly prevalent electronic environment and how this can modify the leadership paradigm (Ochara, 2013).

## 2.2. Adding "E" into Leadership

Leadership has been characterised by researchers from a variety of perspectives. It has been described as a personality, a skill, a method, a behaviour or a position (DeRue, 2011; Grint, 2010; Northouse, 1997). Leadership has also been classified as a process by which an individual influences a group of people to attain a shared objective (Northouse, 1997). Since the focus of this research study is on e-leadership, I will utilise a broad definition of leadership, in which the leader is viewed as someone who guides a group of people, an organisation, and promotes their transformational efforts and operations (Cortellazzo et al., 2019).

Recently, leadership scholars have attempted to examine the impact of the digitalisation process (Cortellazzo et al., 2019) on the practice of leadership. The term "e-leadership" was coined to define a new type of leader who is continuously interacting with technology (Cortellazzo et al., 2019). E-leadership is defined as a social influence practice facilitated by advanced information technology (AIT) to bring about a transformation in feelings, behaviours, attitudes, and/or performance with individuals, teams, and/or organisations (Avolio et al., 2001). Moreover, this type of leadership encompasses leading and managing distributed work groups despite being physically absent and operates primarily through digital communication. E-leaders, are therefore, "boundary managers" who interact and motivate employees from a distance (Kerfoot, 2010). Rather than viewing e-leadership as merely an extension of conventional leadership, Avolio and Kahai (2003) argue that it should be considered a radical shift in how followers and leaders interact and how technology can be

incorporated within leadership (Song & Ford, 2022). The leader does not necessarily have to be a "tech guru" as she or he only needs to know how to take advantage of advanced technology and lead effectively via technology (Contreras et al., 2020).

The core purpose of leadership remains the same in a virtual environment. For instance, Avolio & Kahai (2003), argued that e-leadership seeks to build and propagate corporate vision, bind individuals and/or organisations together, as well as coordinate and supervise the implementation of plans. However, there are considerable distinctions between leading traditional organisations and leading in the digital environment, with the fundamental difference being that e-leadership takes shape in the virtual context where ICT facilitates cooperation and leader-follower interactions (Gurr, 2004; He, 2008). Contemporary leadership theories seen in traditional organisations are, however, insufficient for the digital era, as these theories are "too static, too macro, too political, too conceptually under-developed" (Wilson, 2004, p. 860) for the distributed and complex processes that form the digital world (DasGupta, 2011). For instance, according to Kayworth and Leidner (2002), the entire reliance on information technology as a communication medium is one component of the virtual realm. This application of communication technology is argued to influence an e-leader's capacity to transmit social presence as well as information-rich nonverbal cues, such as gesture, voice inflections, body language, and facial expressions, which are inherent to traditional face-to-face settings (Kayworth & Leidner, 2002). According to the Social Presence Theory (SPT) (Short et al., 1976), when communication formats shift from in-person to digitally-mediated technology, the capacity to convey contextual information deteriorates. E-leaders are, therefore, required to cultivate an online social presence in order to be deemed as a "real person" in their digitally mediated space (Bickle et al., 2019; Walvoord et al., 2008). Moreover, in many virtual environments, the tasks of establishing trust, community building and communication appear to be increasingly critical for e-leaders, which necessitates the need to exhibit highly interpersonal skills regardless of the ICT medium employed for e-leaders (Gurr, 2004; Gurr, 2006). E-leaders face a variety of challenges that set them apart from traditional leadership (Lilian, 2014). Thus, operating in the digital realm with dispersed networked teams and virtual interaction and communication as an e-leader will require new ways of thinking, forcing leaders to acquire the necessary skills and adapt to this new form of leadership.

## 2.3. Leading Virtual Teams

Virtual teams comprise of dispersed team members working from various geographical regions that utilise digital technology as a means to interact, collaborate, and carry out work tasks (Jawadi et al., 2013; Martins et al., 2004). The collaborative utilisation of technology is an essential feature for virtual teams that sets them apart from traditional in-person teams. This enables organisations to enhance the available pool of resources by acquiring the appropriate expertise irrespective of where they are situated globally (Bell & Kozlowski, 2002; Kerber & Buono, 2004; Kirkman et al., 2012). Yet, e-leaders may experience a variety of obstacles when leading virtual teams, namely, information distribution, trust building, preserving motivation, coordination, establishing relationships, knowledge sharing practices and communication (Contreras et al., 2020; Lilian, 2014; Savolainen, 2014). For instance, since geographic dispersion is inherent to virtual teams, which entails the lack of physical interaction and communication, virtual team members may have little understanding of one another. This lack of understanding can contribute to conflict and misunderstandings, and thus, possibly impede the formation of trust and social relationships (Duarte & Snyder, 2006; Garro-Abarca et al., 2021; Kerber & Buono, 2004; Lin et al., 2008). Greater dependence on technology, time zone differences and physical proximity may obstruct conflict management, the coordination of tasks, exchange of information and trust building (Cortellazzo et al., 2019; Kirkman et al., 2012). This produces an array of challenges concerning the communication between members, the formation of social relationships, leading a culturally diverse team, fostering trust in a virtual environment, and feelings of isolation (Duarte and Snyder, 2006; Lin et al., 2008; Garro-Abarca et al., 2021; Shuffler et al., 2010).

Malhotra, Majchrzak and Rosen (2007) studied virtual teams to determine the most effective leadership practice within virtual teams. The authors employed a mixed-methods approach. Fifty-four virtual teams were identified and used within their research study. Team leaders from each virtual team were interviewed by the authors during the data collection process. The team members from the corresponding virtual teams then completed a survey, which was completed by 269 individuals representing the 54 virtual teams. The authors concluded that effective e-leadership strategies are encompassed by the ability to (1) yield and maintain trust through the utilisation of ICT, (2) ensure that diversity is clearly comprehended and valued, (3) sufficiently manage and evaluate the life cycles of virtual work, (4) proactively manage and monitor the progress of the virtual team through digital technology, (5) increase

virtual team members' exposure both within and outside the organisation, and finally, (6.) ensure that individual team members benefit from the team (Malhotra et al., 2007). As research in many domains continues to evolve, new advances and outcomes may challenge or even dispute previously drawn conclusions. Thus, while Malhotra's et al (2007) study has provided valuable insights and serves as a foundation for new research, it is imperative to recognise the limitations of studies conducted over 16 years ago since it may be deemed outdated. As such, Malhotra's et al. (2007) study may not reflect the most recent understandings of e-leadership, which supports the need to conduct research that adequately reflects the current state of knowledge on e-leadership.

Moreover, in a study conducted by Van Wart, Roman, Wang and Liu (2019), the authors identified fifteen common problems regarding the practice of e-leadership, including communication chaos, miscommunication, poor encouragement of small groups, insufficient instructor support, the absence of instructor attention, inadequate accountability and use of accountability incentives, poor understanding of ICTs, weak management of change, weak management of the basic and auxiliary technology, underutilisation of appropriate ICTs, insufficient trust in the instructor, insufficient security management, poor oversight of diversity, continuous contact issues for the instructor, and insufficient and weak communication. In addition to the identified problems associated with the practice of e-leadership, Van Wart et al. (2019) argues further that there are three primary reasons why e-leadership is essential to understand. Firstly, it is vital for leaders to attain the skills in the many forms of communications to be effective. Yet, as new technologies continue to emerge, the proliferation of new communication channels have intensified, resulting in significant implications on leaders, such as "constant contact" and the challenge of communication overload (Avolio et al., 2014). Secondly, the rise of technology has fostered changes in organisational structures, influencing how leadership is exercised. Leaders are required to manage and organise digital communication as virtual teams and telework become more prevalent (Van Wart et al., 2019). Finally, the shift in practical requirements for leaders who are expected to be proficient with new ICTs. However, the fusion of these diverse technologies has made this more challenging and yet, technological expectations continue to grow (Yong and Gates, 2014). Thereby, this serves to further reinforce the imperative need to study and understand e-leadership further.

## 2.4. Research Trends on E-leadership

The drive behind e-leadership was established by what Avolio and Kahai (2003) classified as the "quiet revolution", resulting in many critical human interactions now being fostered by information technology (Avolio & Kahai, 2003). In view of organisation's rapid technological development and their progressively international presence, Zaccaro and Bader (2003) postulated that e-leadership will become the norm rather than the exception as remote working tools have become relatively accessible and inexpensive for organisations, which has improved remote working capabilities (Bao et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2021). However, despite the growing interest in examining the relationship between leadership and digital technology, contributions have assembled in a fragmented manner from multiple disciplines. Scholars have, struggled to identify broader patterns of change arising from the digital enterprise as a result of this fragmentation (Schwarzmüller et al., 2018; Cortellazzo et al., 2019). As such, there is significant conceptual confusion regarding e-leadership, with at least three separate streams of research producing various understandings (Gurr, 2006). In the first, which has been based mainly on the work of organisation consultancies, current perceptions of leadership are rebranded as e-leadership and then applied to modern organisations, suggesting that the same style of leadership that has previously proven to be effective can be used. Yet, this perspective fails to recognise that many people are working in environments that did not exist previously, for instance the growth of virtual teams, and that different forms of leadership are required (Kayworth & Leidner, 2002; Gurr, 2006).

The second stream of research derives from interviews and surveys of organisation leaders, and depicts e-leadership as a continuation of current perceptions regarding effective leadership. The Center for Creative Leadership and Forrester Research surveyed 546 leaders from a variety of industries in an effort to better understand the difficulties that leaders are encountering as a result of technology. To further comprehend these executives' viewpoints, Pulley and Sessa (2001) conducted in-depth interviews with 35 of these executives. These authors, thus, then examined the effects of digital technology on leadership, identifying e-leadership as a complex concept that is characterised by five fundamental paradoxes: (a) swift and mindful, which refers to the dilemma of balancing between systematic, routinised responses with innovation; (b) individual and community, which refers to the dilemma of permitting employees to be more autonomous without feeling isolated; (c) top-down and grass-roots, which refers to the dilemma in deciding when to employ control while promoting

collaboration; (d) details and big picture, which alludes to the dilemma of sorting through a vast amount of material and making sense of it; and (e) flexible and steady, which refers to the dilemma in maintaining direction and meaning in the presence of constant change (Pulley & Sessa, 2001). Thus, Pulley and Sessa's (2001) research reveals that a more dispersed perspective of leadership is forming due to the advancements in ICT. However, e-leadership encompasses more than the mere act of leaders, but also the perceptions of employees (Avolio et al., 2001). Thereby, the research study done by Pulley and Sessa (2001) may have been limited by its exclusive focus on the perspectives of leaders. As such, the incorporation of both employees' and leaders' experiences of e-leadership illustrates the unique contribution that this research study can offer since a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomena can be achieved. Additionally, given that this research was carried out more than 20 years ago, it may not offer an adequate basis for current research on e-leadership. It can, therefore, be argued that there is a need to conduct research that adequately reflects the current state of knowledge on e-leadership.

Finally, the third stream of research uses experimental and quasi-experimental research to demonstrate that leadership behaviour differs in electronically-mediated environments, implying that e-leadership not only builds upon current leadership, but our perception of leadership is changing due to its interaction with technology (Avolio et al., 2001; Gurr, 2004). For instance, Avolio et al. (2001) observed that since electronic communication technologies facilitate greater communication frequency and immediate input, e-leadership can be significantly more efficient than in-person leadership, particularly within a work setting that demands a high level of collaboration. It is evident that from these three streams of research, technologically-mediated environments are shaping the way we understand leadership. The use of ICT and leadership have a symbiotic relationship in which technological advances lead to changes in leadership behaviour, and when leadership behaviour evolves, new uses for ICT emerge (Gurr, 2006). Yet, due to technological advancements and the adoption of virtual work arrangements, organisations have overlooked the study of e-leadership, making it challenging to reconcile these various perspectives (Avolio et al., 2014). This is clearly relevant in light of the COVID-19 pandemic which drastically enforced many organisations to rapidly change traditional working conditions.

Turning to another important area of inquiry, Alexander et al (2021) estimates that it will become far more common for organisations to adopt a hybrid work approach that will integrate

both on-site and remote working as the COVID-19 pandemic eases (Alexander et al., 2021). For instance, Novu Office (2022) found that only 35% of organisations used or intended to use hybrid work approaches before the pandemic. This was based on a large-scale survey of human resources and senior executives from 841 Swiss companies across a variety of different industries (Novu Office, 2022). Currently, 77% of organisations utilise or intend to use a hybrid work approach in the future according to the same report published by Novu Office (2022). Embracing a hybrid work model requires organisations to train leaders for e-leadership roles, redesigning procedures and rethinking how to support employees to thrive in their roles (Alexander et al., 2021). Yet, there is a limited understanding on how to optimally practice e-leadership within a hybrid working environment. Thus, the fundamental disparities in implementing remote work before, during, and after the pandemic and how this modifies what it means to be an e-leader, the sparse knowledge on e-leadership as well as the ramifications of hybrid and remote work arrangements with regards to e-leadership all necessitate the need to explore this leadership paradigm in order to gain a comprehensive grasp on the phenomenon (Babapour Chafi et al., 2022).

Although some aspects of universal leadership theoretical frameworks are applicable to e-leadership (Liu et al., 2020), what e-leadership entails during and post the COVID-19 pandemic has shifted. For instance, in their mixed-methods research approach, Van Wart et al. (2019) investigated an exploratory case study and, in turn, proposed an operational description of e-leadership in accordance with six broad competencies. Using a single-case study methodological approach, a public university was investigated by Van Wart et al. (2019). The authors' study included students and faculty who were affiliated with the university in their sample. Focus groups, structured interviews, participant observation, and self-administered surveys were the four primary sources utilised to acquire the data. Thirty structured interviews were conducted with knowledgeable informants. In addition to the structured interviews, authors were given access to a faculty list whereby they were able to conduct a self-administrated survey. The sum of all responses from "leaders" within the institution was 209. Additionally, 309 pupils from two sizable classes were surveyed. In the instance of students, a series of five focus groups totalling 32 students were additionally held (Van Wart et al., 2019). Based on the results, the authors presented a description of e-leadership based on the following competencies: (1) trustworthiness (honesty, sense of trust, work-life balance, follow-through, consistency, support of diversity, integrity, and fairness), (2) technological expertise (technological knowledge, accurate use of suitable ICTs, technological security, and

combining virtual and traditional practices), (3) change management skill (covering change techniques), (4) team building skills (team member acknowledgement, team motivation, and team accountability), (5) social skills (leaders' support), and (6) communication competencies (prevention of miscommunication, clarity in communication, and communication flow management) (Van Wart et al., 2019). However, although this research inquiry offers an in-depth structure of the vital components that constitute e-leadership, it did not provide a comprehensive review of how e-leadership operates or its influence on organisational outcomes, limiting the study's scope. Since the current qualitative research study aims to explore experiences of e-leadership from both leaders and employees, a broader research design can be adopted that enables the researcher to examine various aspects of e-leadership in addition to the competencies that constitute fruitful e-leadership. Additionally, the very nature of this mixed-method research study necessitates the integration of several types of data, making it challenging to manage. The complex nature of e-leadership may be better addressed by a phenomenological qualitative research approach, as it enables the researcher to concentrate on an in-depth examination of these experiences.

Despite recent publications on the e-leadership phenomenon, such as Tigre et al., (2023), Kashive et al. (2022), Chamakiotis et al. (2021), Contreras et al. (2020), Darics (2020), Mustajab et al. (2020), Van Wart et al. (2019), and Roman et al. (2019), there is a scarcity of contemporary literature and research on e-leadership in today's working climate. While some broad conclusions regarding e-leadership can be drawn from the literature, more specific recommendations and guidelines for leaders who must transition into the current era of digitalisation are still needed especially in the post-pandemic workplace (Avolio et al., 2014; Darics, 2020; Oh & Chua, 2018; Mustajab et al., 2020; Van Wart et al., 2019). Leaders are, therefore, failing to acclimate to new technological practices and the shift into e-leadership, which may potentially hinder the team's and organisation's overall success. Therefore, the post-pandemic future of work becomes a fruitful platform to study e-leadership as a means of exploring the opportunities and challenges that employees and leaders may encounter to gain a deeper understanding on what e-leadership currently entails.

### 2.5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the fundamental transformation to virtual functions and modalities has significantly impacted the environment in which leadership and organisational structures are practiced and exercised within (Van Wart et al., 2016). As a result, the emerging paradigm of

e-leadership was established to define the working environment where leadership interactions are classified by technologically mediated communication between geographically dispersed leaders and employees (Avolio et al., 2009; Kelloway et al., 2003; Lilian, 2014). Currently, many leaders' daily work entails practising leadership in the virtual sphere, yet our understanding of how leadership is enacted in technologically mediated environments is limited (Darics, 2020). Leaders are, therefore, failing to adapt to new technological practices and the transition into e-leadership, which may potentially hinder the team's and organisation's overall success. Therefore, it becomes necessary to understand the notion of e-leadership as it is becoming increasingly embedded within current workplace practices.

### 2.6. Research Questions and Hypothesis

This study aimed to contribute to the existing body of limited research and literature on e-leadership, and by doing so, can assist leaders in organisations to lead effectively as an e-leader, which will allow them to better achieve their goals and objectives. Thus, this research study aimed to gain a richer understanding of e-leadership by examining employees' experiences of their leaders leading in the virtual realm as e-leasers as well as examine leaders experiences leading in the virtual realm as e-leaders. Therefore, the following research questions were developed:

1.) What are employees lived experiences being led by e-leaders within current working conditions (i.e., operating within a hybrid-working approach or full-time remote work)?

2.) What are leaders lived experiences leading as an e-leader within current working conditions (i.e., operating within a hybrid-working approach or full-time remote work)?

# Chapter 3: Methods:

## 3.1. Research Design

Given the nature of this research study, a qualitative research design, within an interpretivist paradigm, was adopted to answer the proposed research questions. The objective of qualitative research is to address questions about how to better comprehend the meaning, perceptions and experience components of people's lives and social worlds, and provide the interpretation of existing perceptions and experiences related to the topic of interest (Babbie, 2016). The ability to highlight the subjective meanings, actions, and social contexts of participants is critical to qualitative research (Fossey et al., 2002). Specifically, the study followed a phenomenological qualitative research approach as it focused on the participant's lived experiences. Adopting this approach enabled the research to evaluate how the participants discuss their experiences leading as an e-leader or being led by an e-leader within their organisation (Creswell, 2013). A hermeneutic phenomenological approach was selected as this research study aimed to interpret experiences (Laverty, 2003). In line with this approach, the research study gathered detailed descriptions of the participants' experiences, allowing for a more in-depth analysis and interpretation of the data.

## 3.2. Participants and Recruitment

The target population for this research was leaders who are currently experiencing or have experienced leading as an e-leader as well as those individuals who are currently experiencing or have experienced being led by an e-leader within Gauteng, South Africa. Thus, by understanding the experiences that occur when leading as an e-leader or being led by an e-leader, through those who have already lived or are currently living through these experiences, it helps to obtain a thorough understanding for the facets that define working in the virtual realm as an e-leader. In order to address the proposed research questions for this study, participants were recruited through snowball sampling. This is a popular, non-probability sample selection technique that is based on referrals from initially sampled participants to other people who are thought to exhibit the characteristic of interest (Johnson, 2014). Participants must be currently experiencing or have had the experience of being led by an e-leader, or alternatively they must currently be experiencing or have had the experience of leading as an e-leader to ensure that the relevant theoretical themes are being addressed for this study. Additionally, the researcher attempted to obtain a variety of demographic characteristics

amongst the participants, such as age, gender and length of experience in the organisation as a leader, and the participants were of working age from 18 to 65 years old. Appendix D provides an overview of the respondents within this study. Therefore, a non-probability criterion and snowball sample was deemed the best suited technique for this study.

The determination of a sample size within qualitative research is context-specific and somewhat reliant on the scientific paradigm in which the study is conducted (Boddy, 2016). However, Onwuegbuzie and Collins (2007) argue that the sample size in qualitative research should not be so small that theoretical saturation, data saturation or information redundancy are difficult to attain. Similarly, the sample size should not be so large that conducting a thorough, case-based analysis becomes difficult (Onwuegbuzie & Collins, 2007). Thus, to achieve data saturation in qualitative research, it has previously been recommended that a sample size of twelve should be used (Fugard & Potts, 2015; Guest et al., 2006). As a result, this research study obtained a total sample size of fourteen.

### 3.3. Procedure

Participants were recruited using a snowball sampling approach, which entailed accessing participants using contact information provided by other participants (Noy, 2008). Thus, to initiate this process, I set up preliminary meetings with known others from the population as a means to seek recommendations for potential participants, which may include family or friends of mine. Furthermore, I assured all individuals involved that they are not obliged to supply further names if they do not wish to. Following the initial recommendations, I contacted the recommended potential participants once they had agreed to being contacted. Here, I provided the interested potential participants with the purpose, nature and scope of the study, and what their involvement would be if they decided to participate. Those involved were made aware that participation is voluntary, and that no identifying information would be used when writing up the report. Additionally, the interested potential participants were informed that audio recordings would be employed by the researcher during the interview process, which only the researcher and her supervisor would have access to. Upon agreement to partaking in the study, a time, date and location were decided upon to conduct the interviews. Once the interview had been conducted, further recommendations of potential informants were made provided by the participant. This strategy was repeated until the study had a sufficient number of participants. Careful consideration was given to the selection of the sample to ensure that replication of demographics was averted.

### 3.4. Method of Data Collection

Semi-structured face-to-face interviews were employed for this study. This enables an exchange to take place between the participants and I, which allows participants the freedom to express their views in their own terms (Bryman & Bell, 2007; DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). Employing a semi-structured interview, yielded a guided, yet flexible layout in which the relevant questions could be answered while also enabling participants to expand, add to, elaborate, and clarify any questions, thereby addressing comprehensiveness and richness, which are central components to interviewing (Bryman & Bell, 2007; Cohen et al., 2007; Jamshed, 2014; DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). The interviews were conducted for a duration of approximately forty-five minutes to an hour and twenty minutes. The participant's subjective understandings, experiences and meanings regarding e-leadership were the cornerstone of the interview schedule (Appendix E and Appendix F). Furthermore, the interview schedule was produced by myself, and some of the questions were drawn from previous literature presented by Hambley et al (2007), Green (2020), and Murashkin and Johanna (2020). The set of interview questions were phrased in correspondence to the participant's work role in their organisation. In other words, similar yet separate interview questions were constructed for leaders versus employees regarding their experiences with e-leadership. Moreover, the interview questions were open-ended and incorporated probes to evoke more details and information in order to promote the use of thick description to make sure that transferability had been attained (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). I, occasionally, employed follow-up questions to acquire richer, more detailed responses from participants. Finally, I made use of "sweeper questions" towards the end of the interview, which encourages respondents to voice any additional relevant information that had not already been addressed in the interview (Drever, 1995).

Bryman and Bell (2007) assert that in order to minimise the risk of misunderstanding, the use of technical and overcomplex terms should be averted. Rather, language deemed clear and straightforward is recommended. The generated interview guideline was evaluated by my research supervisor as a means to deter any confusing terminology and to ensure that the questions were relevant to the topic of interest for this study. Furthermore, I made use of piloting the interview schedule as this allowed me to practice the interviewing techniques and implement modifications if needed (Majid et al., 2017). Since the interview process was conducted at multiple points in time, and it employed a snowball sampling technique, I was

able to make adjustments to the instrument as and if required during the interval between interviews through an iterative learning process.

In the context where face-to-face interviews were not possible, I employed online communication platforms, such as Zoom, Skype or Microsoft teams, as a means of conducting online interviews. Online interviews are a viable alternative to in-person interviews as they still enable me to openly engage and communicate with the participants of this study. Additionally, online interviews provide practical advantages and logistical convenience, including the reduction of geographical restrictions, the ability for me to reach geographically dispersed participants, mitigated travel costs, and it provided greater scheduling flexibility for both myself and the participants (Irani, 2019). The online interview was conducted in the same manner as a face-to-face interview. As a result, online interviewing maintains several aspects of face-to-face interviews whilst additionally providing researchers and participants with greater convenience and flexibility. Conducting an online interview may present the challenge of establishing rapport with participants. In addition to the limited breadth of data that may be gathered, utilising online interviews may underrepresent individuals who lack access to technology or may not feel comfortable using it. The quality of the interview and audio-recorded files, as well as the clarity of the image and voice, may be affected by technical or internet connection issues that were, at times, encountered (Irani, 2019). This is an important consideration given that the research will be conducted in the South African context. Thus, utilising face-to-face interviews was the preferred method, however, in the case where this was not possible, I made use of a virtual communication platforms as a means of conducting online interviews.

### 3.5. Data Analysis

The data was analysed using interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA). IPA is a qualitative method aimed at providing detailed examinations of subjective lived experiences. It generates an account of lived experiences that is expressed in its own terms instead of a dictated pre-determined theoretical notion (Smith & Osborn, 2015). I utilised IPA to understand, consolidate, and identify numerous themes that arise across the data (Larkin et al., 2016). As a result, I was able to analyse the participant's lived experiences with regards to addressing the proposed research questions. The premise of an IPA is that I, as the research, become engrossed in gaining an understanding with regards to the participant's inner world, which may take the shape of experiences (Smith et al., 2009). Thus, the central focus was on

interpreting and analysing the respondent's personal accounts concerning their experiences of leading as an e-leader or being led by an e-leader. To accomplish this, it is essential for me to capture the meanings associated with the participant's experiences (Smith et al., 2009). However, it is critical for me to recognise that such meanings will not always be immediately obtainable, rather, they will be gained through considerable engagement with the material and the interpretive process (Smith et al., 2009).

At large, IPA offers a set of adaptable principles that can be tailored by researchers based on their study's objectives. Although this research used IPA to analyse the qualitative material in accordance with the recommendations made by Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014), these recommendations serve as an example of one approach in analysing qualitative data. Thus, it is encouraged for researchers to adapt and innovate in their thinking, and avoid treating these guidelines "as a recipe" (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014, p. 6). The first analytic stage encompassed close reading of the transcript several times. This simplified the process for me as the researcher to become fully immersed in the data, and possibly yielded new insight (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). By transcribing all of the interviews myself, I became extremely familiar with the material. At this stage, I made notes about my reflections and observations regarding the interview process as well as any further remarks and thoughts of possible significance. These notes served as a focus on the content, and initial interpretive observations. The process of converting the notes into emergent themes constituted the next phase. This entailed reviewing my notes, as well as the transcript, and reflecting on this source material in an effort to translate these notes and data into emergent themes. In the following phase, I identified emerging themes that are related, and thus, grouped them together based on conceptual similarity, and provided descriptive labels for each cluster (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Several themes were discarded at this point as they lacked a strong evidential foundation, or they were not deemed relevant to the developing structure. Thus, a total of twelve themes were finalised and reported in the findings section (Chapter 4).

### 3.6. Reliability and Validity

It is essential for qualitative researchers to provide evidence of trustworthiness. To achieve this, it is imperative for me, as the researcher, to consider confirmability, dependability, credibility, and transferability to ensure that the research is reliable and valid (Pandey & Patnaik, 2014). With regards to confirmability, I made every effort to identify any biases that I may hold as well as attempt to mitigate them in order to improve confirmability. Although

some degree of bias is inevitable, Ravitch and Carl (2019) argue that it is still essential to try to lessen its influence by being cognisant of it throughout the entire duration of the research process. As suggested by Patton (2016), maintaining an impartial and open mindset during the process of conducting interviews and data analysis aided in the acknowledgement and minimisation of bias. Dependability relates to the consistency of the data over similar conditions (Cope, 2014; Tobin & Begley, 2004). This can be accomplished when other researchers concur with the choices made at each phase of the study process (Cope, 2014). This study's dependability was maintained by meticulously recording every step of the research procedure, which demonstrates a clear and thoughtful research strategy. As a result, the study's outcomes may be deemed reliable and can be replicated if required. By employing established research methods and approaches that are compatible with qualitative studies, the study's credibility was strengthened.

Ensuring complete independence between the two participant groups, namely leaders and employees, was considered for the participants of this study. Specifically, no pre-existing relations existed among the participants within these two distinct groups. This decision was made to preserve the validity and reliability of the study's findings, promoting an environment conducive to obtaining open and unbiased responses during the interviews. The rapport-building efforts further contributed to the participants' willingness to share their experiences, ultimately enhancing the validity of the research outcomes.

Armstrong et al. (1997) argued that some researchers regard inter-rater reliability as a key strategy for assuring rigour. Thus, the practice of inter-rater reliability was employed for this research as my research supervisor continuously evaluated and assessed this research study throughout its entire duration to ensure credibility had been maintained. Transferability measures how well a study's results may be applied to different population groups or situations, and how applicable these results are to those who were not involved in the study (Cope, 2014). According to Miles et al (2014), the quality of transferability of a study can be improved by using a variable participant selection approach, imposing constraints on sample selection, and measuring this study's consistency with other studies. Furthermore, Elo et al. (2014) emphasised that in order for others to determine the applicability of the findings to other population groups, researchers must provide precise, rich and thick descriptions of the sample studied. Further discussion about the evaluation of this study in each of these characteristics constituting transferability is provided below:

### *3.6.1. Variability in participant selection:*

Within this study, industry, race and ethnicity, gender, length of working experience, age, and experience with e-leadership were all subject to variation. Due to the evident variability within this study's participant sample group, there is a greater probability for transferability to be attained.

### *3.6.2. Limitations in Sample Selection:*

In order to obtain data saturation, it has previously been suggested that qualitative research attain a minimum sample size of at least twelve (Guest et al., 2006). However, reduced sample sizes may impede the likelihood of transferability to occur, especially if the sample's participants share a great deal of similarities. Yet, diverse sampling can permit greater applicability to other contexts (Miles et al., 2014). As previously mentioned, the evident variability of this study's sampling group helped minimise the possible limitations of transferability due to sample selection.

### *3.6.3.Consistency with Other Studies:*

A study's transferability is improved when its characteristics are consistent with those of other studies. In terms of the conceptualisation of e-leadership, the results of this study were in line with those of other studies. While the recounted personal experiences of the respondents had some distinctive features, overall, the types of experiences detailed by the leaders and employees in this study were congruent with those identified in previous research.

### *3.6.4. Rich, Thick Descriptions:*

Within this study, extracting detailed, in-depth accounts from the respondents was one of the primary methods employed. Maxwell (2013) advised researchers to utilise complete transcripts rather than solely use my notes to generate detailed, in-depth descriptions. Furthermore, to ensure that in-depth and detailed descriptions were generated, I repeatedly asked open-ended questions to respondents, such as, "What has been your experience thus far being led in virtual teams?" and "Do you think that the relationship between you and your team has changed due to the practice of e-leadership?".

### 3.7. Ethical Considerations

An ethical clearance was completed and submitted to the relevant School Ethics Committee. The research commenced once it had been granted ethical clearance. Participation was voluntary and no participant should have felt compelled to participate in this research. To avoid deception and lack of consent, participants were sufficiently informed prior to their participation to ensure that they are able to adequately decide if they want to participate in this study (Bryman & Bell, 2007). Before starting the interview, I ensured that the participants were made aware of the purpose and scope of the research. Participants who agreed to partake in the study were then provided a participant information sheet (Appendix A), which outlined the purpose and scope of the study to further mitigate the risk of deceit. Participants were given and requested to sign consent forms concerning the use of audio recordings and their participation in the study (Appendix B; Appendix C). Before the commencement of interviews, I made it clear to the participants that they had the right to refuse to answer specific questions or to withdraw from the interview at any given point, without facing any penalties. I also ensured that the research study's participants remained confidential and anonymous. Certain procedures were taken to ensure that confidentiality and anonymity were maintained, such as the disposal of the audio recordings once the transcripts had been completed, as well as making use of pseudonyms. It is essential to maintain the confidentiality of all participants involved as a means of establishing trust as well as encourage open and candid exchanges regarding their experiences. As such, by making use of pseudonyms, I was able to protect the identities of all participants involved in this research study. Furthermore, the selected pseudonyms were carefully chosen to avoid any resemblance to the participant's real names or any identifiable personal characteristics. Audio recordings were kept in a secure place and the transcripts were on a password protected computer, which only myself and my research supervisor had access to (Appendix C). Finally, if the participant requests it, feedback on the study's results will be provided if it is deemed appropriate.

# Chapter 4: Results

The aim of this study was to gain a comprehensive understanding of e-leadership by exploring employees' experiences of their leaders leading in the virtual realm as e-leaders as well as to explore leaders' experiences of leading in the virtual realm as e-leaders. The research questions are as follows:

1.) What are employees lived experiences being led by e-leaders within current working conditions (i.e., operating within a hybrid-working approach or full-time remote work)?

2.) What are leaders lived experiences leading as an e-leader within current working conditions (i.e., operating within a hybrid-working approach or full-time remote work)?

A total of twelve themes and several related subthemes emerged from the dataset that constituted both leaders and employees. First, this section will describe and present the themes and related sub-themes that arose from employees' interviews based on their e-leadership experiences. This will then be followed by the themes and sub-themes found from leaders' interviews.

## 4.1. Results from Employees' Interviews:

For employees, seven themes and a number of associated sub-themes emerged. These included: Communication; Difficulty Inspiring and Showing Charisma; The Need to Humanise the Remote Work Experience; Resources; Greater Connectedness; Effortful Leadership; and Trust (Control vs Freedom). These are described below:

### *4.1.1. Communication*

The responses of the participants highlighted numerous sub-themes around their experiences with communicating under e-leadership, such as communication deemed as effective or ineffective, the way to communicate virtually has changed, and frequency of communication:

#### 4.1.1.1. Communication Deemed as Effective or Ineffective:

When asking participants about virtual communication when being led by an e-leader, several viewpoints arose pertaining to technology's effectiveness or ineffectiveness when communicating virtually. Noah found communication with e-leaders to be effective as it is a

reliable record, and this sense of reliability removes any form of miscommunication in the virtual realm as compared to communicating in-person:

*If there's a record of what was discussed or requested or (pause) and is also recorded of the responses people have provided to that or commitments that are shown to meeting, to meeting those, those commitments then (pause) it's, it's, there's a sense of reliability"* (Noah)

*"I think one, for me is having everything having a record of everything in, in text, it's, it's something that everyone can rely on. And it avoids confusion, which can come about from situations where things are said in passing or in-person. And there's kind of miscommunication about what, may or may not have needed to be understood."* (Noah)

Additionally, many participants found communication to be effective due to the technological platforms and features provided in the virtual realm as these have all of the required functionality to effectively communicate with and from e-leaders:

*"You'd be able to communicate as effectively cause now we have screenshare and all of that stuff so you can really show them what you're doing"* (Eddie)

*"In the systems space, noo, I think Teams and Zoom, and emails have all the functionality we could possibly need. I-I didn't really feel limited at all."* (Sue)

Inversely, some participants found digital mediums to be unreliable and, thus, ineffective, when communicating virtually with e-leaders due to general technical and/or connectivity issues

*"I think the biggest thing is, like if your laptop isn't working properly, the internet might not be working properly, or if it's slow it can really create, like, a lot of frustration. And, like, yeah, just, just be very irritating of, like okay, you're in a Zoom meeting, you need to get things through, but the camera keeps freezing and you're missing what the person said. And then the other person has to repeat the same thing fifty-five times. And by the time you've got it, the meeting's done, and you haven't covered, like, the other ten things that you needed to get to. So, I guess it is more so, like that lack of reliability, in a sense."* (Hannah)

Furthermore, some participants said that one of the key limitations of communicating with and from e-leaders virtually, is the inability to communicate your point effectively and the increased likelihood of miscommunications to occur, especially when discussing more

complex tasks at hand. This may be a result of the difficulty in determining if someone fully comprehends what is being stated as rich non-verbal cues, such as body language and/or facial expressions, are often removed in the online space:

*"I do feel, like, you know, being next to the person you do get work done in teamwork a lot quicker, so maybe that is a downfall of this experience, is because you, you, you, you won't be able to communicate your point as effectively."* (Eddie)

*"The room for miscommunication is, I think, the largest one. If someone doesn't isn't able to communicate to you clearly and I think, you know … you're asked to do a thing the thing you're asked to do isn't communicated particularly well, you know, it's sent through a Teams message because they were in a meeting, and you spend the next couple of hours doing the thing and as soon as you can get them on a call to show them, "Hey, you asked me to do X, I've done X", it turns out that that's not what they wanted. It wasn't communicated very well, and now you gotta restart the thing."* (Arthur)

*"I think also there's less room for (brief pause) sorry or there's more room for miscommunications and confusion when you're working online. So, I feel if it's a bit more difficult to gauge if someone actually understood what they were, what you've asked for them online than it is in-person and I think wires can get crossed in, you know, might lead to redoing work or having to explain something a couple of times"* (Arthur)

#### 4.1.1.2. The Way to Communicate Virtually has Changed:

Many participants highlighted the importance of clear, and intentional communication from their e-leaders to ensure that they fully understand what is expected from them as well as to prevent any confusions from arising, since rich non-verbal communication cues are typically already absent in the virtual environment:

*"Okay, I think one, one major one is really patience, patience and communication. Which do work hand-in-hand from what I think because with, with any organisation, you're working with a human, you know? It's not, it's not (brief pause) guaranteed that the other person is going to understand. He's not going to understand something that you want them to do. That's even when you're working together in-person. And when you're now working virtually, you know, there's a lot that's not, that's not clear. The tone and the, like clarity on emails is, is already*

*lost to begin with … so if a leader is patient and does well with communicating with a team well enough to ensure that their message is delivered to the other person"* (Peter)

*"So, I think another thing that they can really do to be effective is just be very intentional with communication in terms of what is required. And you know, the level of detail of a certain thing or maybe if they've done something before and they liked a process and guiding the team and taking them through, like the actual process from start to finish and saying, "This is how I actually want it done". So, everyone has an idea of what's going on in terms of, you know, some managers that are just not very good at communicating, they just give you the work. You don't really know what to do and then you always have, like extra because you're confused."* (Erin)

Many participants expressed that the virtual communication with e-leaders can be rendered ineffective as a result of delayed response time and greater back-and-forth exchanges taking place to reach a point of understanding. As a result, virtual communication is deemed to be more time-consuming. Thus, clear, and efficient communication is required:

*"Obviously, sometimes you do have a bit of back-and-forth discussing certain things getting to understand what the other person is trying to get from you before you can actually carry out your workload and it's sometimes time consuming."* (Peter)

*"So yeah, I think if my work now had to become something which was … which was more of, like a face-to-face, physical office kind of space, I think it would be the same. I think the only difference would be is that communication would happen a lot more efficiently, frequently. Because, yeah, it's, it's quick to pop your head into someone's office and just ask a quick question. Whereas, any question has to be, like, physically communicated either over a message or email. And obviously that then takes a bit more time to get feedback from"* (Hannah)

*"I think also because we're all very much aware that it is all online everyone's very cognisant of the fact that you need to be communicative. If you get an email, respond to it. If you get a message, like respond to it as soon as you get a chance. Like, it's not a case of, like "I'll respond to it in a few days" kind of thing"* (Hannah)

Jade, conversely, viewed the delayed response time as positive feature when working remotely, since individuals are provided the opportunity to consider their reply before responding.

*"On the other hand, though, if you, if you're a person who needs time to react to something, then e-leadership might be better because you won't just have people randomly coming up to your desk and asking 'Can you help me with this?'. Like, it gives you maybe a split-second more time to like, logically think about the reaction or the answer that you're going to give."* (Jade)

#### 4.1.1.3. Frequency of Communication

The next subtheme apparent was the frequency of communication from e-leaders. Generally, it was found that increased frequency of communication is required when being led by an e-leader:

*"And also what I what I think would be a lot better is (brief pause) set calls or meetings that are done frequently. It could be every other day to be daily, could be weekly. So, the team is constantly updating each other on what's- what's happening cause quite a lot of information is lost in translation. And this happens if there is no frequency in communication"* (Peter)

*"And yeah, I think (brief pause). Yeah, I think frequent communication is obviously really, really important."* (Hannah)

However, too much communication from e-leaders in the virtual realm can lead to a point of saturation in how receptive employees can be, as Amelia expressed. Therefore, e-leaders must schedule points of communication with their employees to avoid communication overload:

*"I think communication is important. There's, obviously also, like a fine line when it comes to, like e-leadership. Because I feel, like we're often, like over communicated with, like virtually. And I think there is, like a bit of a (brief pause) saturation point for, like how receptive you can be to that. I think maybe, like then just the timing of that would be great. Like, you have a monthly check-in or a weekly check-in, on a Monday morning, first thing (laughs). Nice and fresh."* (Amelia)

### *4.1.2. Difficulty Inspiring and Showing Charisma:*

Motivation was an additional aspect identified by some participants. Due to the challenges of projecting charisma online, many participants found that the digital realm had demotivating features and that e-leadership was less impactful than traditional (i.e., in-person) leadership:

*"So, I mean, if we had to, like look at, like Alexander the Great or you know, Mandela and you asked them to rile the crowd via Teams (laughs) it doesn't work the same. You can't like, force your troops or you can't make them feel like, "Guys, this is something special we're doing here, over teams" like, you know? That message has this- (laughs) I don't feel, I don't feel empowered when I'm speaking to someone over Teams (laughs). I don't feel, like yeah, I just don't feel like, you know, you can coerce me into doing hard work after hours via Teams like if we were stuck together in the same office, you know? As they would say, "In the trenches", but not really trench, you're behind a computer. But, you know, I just feel, like that sort of eagerness, you know, like ability to influence someone, you can't do really much on a work-from home kinda basis."* (Eddie)

*"But yeah, for the most part, I just don't feel the same motivation as when I was in the office"* (Eddie)

*"I think the way you motivate your teams is probably gonna have to change a little bit. I think, at least the leaders in our team, they tend to be quite charismatic, but it's not something that always comes across, you know, over the computer screen …"* (Arthur)

### *4.1.3. The Need to Humanise the Remote Work Experience*

This theme constitutes the need for e-leaders to "humanise" the technology mediated-workspace. Sub-themes include: the absence of humanness, the need for e-leaders to cultivate a presence, humanising through technology, relationship with e-leader, and shifts in formality – where did the fun go?

#### **4.1.3.1. The Absence of Humanness (The Act of Dehumanisation Through a Screen)**

Several participants expressed how technology has dehumanised the experience of work as many components that constitute a human presence have been removed:

*"Like, I don't know, I feel there is a lack of humanness sometimes. Especially when it's, you know, not my direct report but maybe my higher up managers that are above her that don't, like see the human element in things and they just see this is the outcome that they want, and they want it now … I think there needs to be a lot more respect and humanity that comes through leadership and e-leadership because, yeah, you're not just a random face on the screen, you're a human being and life happens, and I think it's important not to forget that."* (Jade)

"*I mean, the one girl that worked there was in hospital, and he still was expecting her to finish her report that she was working on while in hospital. Like, it was just things like that where, like he just- (brief pause) there was no humanity to it. It was just work, work, work, work, work, work, work."* (Hannah)

#### 4.1.3.2. The Need for E-leaders to Cultivate a Presence:

Participants further emphasised the need for e-leaders to establish a presence when working virtually as doing so, may assist employees humanise their experience:

*"Yeah, my old manager … he was always sending memes and he was, like sending, like news reports when it was necessary and he was very leader in that vibe, you know? So, he would make the jokes ... He made his intentions clear in that he was trying on a daily basis to, like be involved with us. On a more personal basis rather than just a work basis."* (Eddie)

*"I think for the most part (brief pause) it relies heavily on having one's presence felt by (brief pause), you know, commenting on forums or group discussion or you know, there are, obviously, reactions and emojis and just kind of showing a sense of presence and commitment to whatever's unfolding. I think, in general, it requires, you know, dropping messages in regularly to the team members, checking-in on where they're at and, you know, making suggestions along the way, which (brief pause) I think sort of happens naturally when you're in-person. But it requires a little bit more, almost, like an extra, extra bit of kind of thinking and motivation to (pause) it's, it's almost like a, like a little bit of extra effort to make it happen virtually. But you kind of need to sort of commit to (brief pause) to that sort of extra bit of communication and motivation if it is or yeah, just you're just making yourself feel present and connected with other people through whatever channels you use virtually. I think that leadership relies heavily on feeling those relationships and those connections"* (Noah)

*"I just think, you know, like daily messages, even if no one is responding to you as a leader to send that thing, you know? Like, send the message. Send the motivational pictures, send- just show that you are trying … and I think, like being around or even if you're not physically around, just being there, and maybe even engaging in the group chats and trying more. I think group chats are kind of something where a leader can show that there's still a leader by, you know, taking advantage of the group chat"* (Eddie)

*"(brief pause) yeah, I guess, I guess, if you could allow a little more of his own personality to come through? (brief pause) perhaps not be as clinical and formal as I found him to be. It would probably allow for me to feel a little bit more connected…I think e-leaders need to not only ensure that all communication is maintained, but they also need to (brief pause) allow their, their own personalities to, to come through and to show through that medium, which I think allows people to form relationships. So, I'd say more, more video calls, or even phone calls as opposed to formal emails"* (Noah)

Participants' accounts of e-leaders needing to establish a presence within the virtual environment alludes to the idea of accessibility and availability. Within the data, it became evident that many participants experienced having limited access to their e-leader or their e-leader being unavailable:

*"It just feels like they're less accessible and more, more out of reach, I guess, more like an ideal."* (Arthur)

*"But yeah, it was really frustrating cause you then- you couldn't get an answer out of him straightaway. You have to actually check, "Okay, when is he actually free" and sometimes he may not have been free on day cause he was really busy. He may have only been even free, like the next day for, like a very short amount of time."* (Erin)

*"So, when we're in the office, it just felt more present, you know, they felt more relatable, more accessible. And I think with virtual, everyone's calendars, especially at, like the higher levels, it's difficult to find, like 10 or 15 minutes, they seem less accessible. And also, it feels like there's a pressure to you know, have a reason to wanna have to take up that valuable time. Whereas a conversation around the water cooler or what our team used to do specifically at large was we'd all sit together. So, you know, those kinds of conversations, those kind of interactions,*

*feel, like they've, I guess, warped in a sense, so I guess, less accessible and more (brief pause) more of an ideal"* (Arthur)

*"And yeah, maybe it was maybe even just, like within Team communications and meetings, like people aren't always available or setting up, like again, like reaching out to, like certain managers may be quite tricky because they're busy in the time that you need them, they're not readily available. They're only available, like tomorrow or whatever it may be"* (Erin)

The uncertainty regarding an e-leader's availability was another significant point raised. Erin found that it is exceptionally difficult to gauge whether or not her e-leader is available when working virtually as she was unable to physically see her e-leader, and thus, felt intimated to reach out:

*"You don't know how, like deep in thought and concentration they are in that moment, you know? Like, if they were there, you could see, "okay, he looks pretty busy right now or he's really concentrating, I'll go see him later." But then if you just send them a Teams message, or, like just randomly call them it's, like you don't know if you may have disrupted, (chuckles) you know, their focus or whatever it was"* (Erin)

#### 4.1.3.3. Humanising through Technology

Some technological features available to employees and e-leaders can be utilised to humanise the virtual work experience, such as emoji's:

*"I like having Whatsapp, cause like, during a Zoom call, we'll be, like sending the eye-rolling emojis. And honestly, like I feel that it's a very important source of emotional support that I get (laughs) from my manager (laughs)"* (Amelia)

*"Moving from times where it was just emails to now where you can send a WhatsApp message with an emoji. That's different levels of (brief pause) familiarity"* (Peter)

Additionally, as an e-leader, the experience of learning how to manage the digital world alongside employees can promote a sense of human essence. For Amelia, not having a technologically savvy e-leader who is still learning how the virtual realm operates, humanised her experience of being led by an e-leader:

*"But I think they were also learning how to do all of this at the same time. Obviously, like a bit more experience and obviously a bit more familiar with, like the emailing platforms and that stuff but also, like a very much, "okay, let's figure this out together". Which I, like, I don't mind. I actually kind of like that (chuckles) Humanising."* (Amelia)

#### 4.1.3.4. Relationship with E-leader

Participants expressed how working virtually impacted their relationship with their e-leader. Some participants found that their relationship had remained satisfactory or had actually improved when working in the virtual realm:

*"Because we started working virtually on, and communicated on Whatsapp, we'd send each other messages about a lot of issues while speaking on Whatsapp or speaking via text, sometimes he knows but not so much that has, (brief pause) has sort of built the relationship because now it's easier for me to reach out when I need something whether in-person or via phone, it's easier (laughs)"* (Peter)

*"I think that she was very involved in, like my orientation and on-boarding kind of period … I moved from a much smaller team of, like 30 people, so it was quite intense. But she was really, really supportive from the get-go. Just, like helping me with the transition, always checking-in with me in the beginning. Like, "How are things going today?", you know, "Have you remembered to take a lunch break?", like those kinds of things. There was always a check-in about my, like, mental health as well. In fact, I think, I remember her even saying to me, like after the orientation period, look I had been there a couple of months and I was quite overwhelmed and quite burnt out and she said to me, you know you can take sick leave. I said to her but I'm not sick. And so, she was like, "Yeah but you're burnt out so you can take sick leave, like I'll approve the leave if you want to take a couple of days." So, I think that that was, I think that was a really good, like, the effort from her part to try and engage in that way and to, like show that she actually cared about me as a person, not just as an employee."* (Jade)

However, working online, according to Amelia, negatively affected her relationship her e-leader as it is difficult to connect with them through a digital platform:

*"I think again, like also just (brief pause) trying (brief pause) to be more conscious of, like (brief pause) I dunno, I guess it's, like part of relationship building, like, trying to learn, like who the person is that you're working with, cause I feel, like you just become, like, you know,*

*like a profile picture and a name? When you have soooo little face-to-face contact with someone, you know, like I don't feel like the project manager, like knows who I am at all or, like understands me in anyway, you know, like when he speaks to me I'm, like (brief pause) y-you know, you might as well be speaking to a complete stranger, like there's no, like personal, like personal relationship there in anyway."* (Amelia)

#### 4.1.3.5. Shifts in Formality – Where did the Fun Go?

In the following extracts, several participants shared their experiences of the formalities that take place working in the virtual realm under an e-leader. Many participants experienced the virtual space to eradicate the fun and informality of work, which was further reinforced by e-leaders:

"*But yeah, maybe the fun is, like disappeared from that aspect. So, now it's more like a job and I guess that's why it makes it easier to leave now because if you want to leave, it's not, like you're holding on to anything besides work, you know? Before it could be it could be the "The friendships, the departments great, you know. I feel so homey over here." And it was like that. It really was a homey environment. And yeah, I guess it's not that anymore. Yes, so, it became more work, it became more work"* (Eddie)

*"There wasn't that space to have those joking conversations of, like, "Oh this is what I did this weekend" kind of thing."* (Hannah)

*"That small talk was a lot of fun, like it would keep you going. It would like, you know, there was always some rubbish to talk to someone about and, I guess, you know, Friday drinks, like disappeared during the COVID time. You go out with your colleagues, whatever, yeah not so much anymore. So, that kind of human aspect that makes the job a bit more fun, um, gone."* (Eddie)

Other participants experienced and suggested various practices and activities to be initiated by e-leaders, such as virtual games, as a means of rendering the virtual environment to be more fun, informal as well as generate a less clinical perception of their work and e-leader:

*"But very recently, it's like trying to change, like in the beginning, like we tried a lot to have, you know, virtual socials so, like how most companies were doing, like having virtual games nights, or things like that"* (Erin)

*"It's just, like something she's initiated to try and keep in contact with us but, I mean we do things, like play Scribble … it's like an online Pictionary and every Friday my team plays Scribble. S-so, it's just, like a bit of fun and, like it's not all about meetings … Like, our morning check-in meetings that we have first thing in the morning, we hardly really speak about work, like it's a space where if we have questions, we can bring them up but more often than not we are just chatting about our weekends or talking about, like our personal lives and playing Scribble and just, like having that kind of human element that I think often lacks in an online environment … Like, for example, just now, (chuckles) I finished work, we've been trying to do something called The Course Development Olympics and our (chuckles) course development department has been split up into teams and over the next, like three months we're doing, like online games as an Olympics thing, using Jackbox, which is, like a games' platform, multiplayer kind of thing. So, that's, like a random thing that we did today. And I was actually in the tournament today so (laughs) it was fun."* (Jade)

*"Do things that allow a space for people to actually get to know each other. Like, we had a team meeting a few weeks ago and our tech guy made a quiz. And it was just to get to know everyone. It was, like random questions about people in the company, but it was so much fun, and we all learnt so much about each other"* (Hannah)

*"Maybe set up virtual games, you know there's, like that virtual gaming thing that teams can get involved in. I think, like make, like make compulsory events online that people can attend as your team, you know. So, that there's a bit more interaction for everyone. So, that you can also see that you're, I guess, that people want to listen to you or if people want to be around you or whatever, I don't know"* (Eddie)

### *4.1.4. Resources*

This fourth theme, Resources, constitutes what, if any, resources were made available to employees by e-leaders. The various sub-themes include tangible resources provided, resources and demands, as well as emotional support:

#### 4.1.4.1. Tangible Resources Provided

Many participants expressed that their e-leaders had, in fact, provided them with the necessary tangible and informational resources as a means of aiding employees' experiences to work online:

*"Like as soon as we were closing up to start working from home. They let us take our screens home, our chairs if we wanted them. We could apply for furniture. As I said, the power units, you know the load-shedding is controllable during the hours in the day. So, they made the work from home situation a bit more comfortable"* (Eddie)

*"And I know that they also offer people to take a home screen from the office because not everyone had one. And in terms of WIFI and stuff, I think most people were, like sorted when it came to things like that but I'm not too sure, they may have also assisted with that. But something they did have, is we actually have 3g cards in our laptops installed. So, and every month you get a top up so that if you didn't have WIFI or you're having connectivity issues, at least you had a backup plan. So yeah, quite prepared."* (Erin)

*"They also have, like guest speakers that host Webinars. They have people that come into the office and then they, like record their lives so you can join in on the meeting from home, about random, sometimes it's about leadership, some of it's about peer networks. Some of it, like they are doing, they do neurodivergent awareness, Black Lives Matter awareness, like all that kind of activist, holding space for other people kind of thing, which is helpful."* (Jade)

However, other participants were not provided any additional tangible or informational resources or support from their e-leader when working remotely. Rather, participants made use of the tools that they already had:

*"When (brief pause) at work when we moved to online, he (brief pause) yeah, he didn't really support us with anything. We kind of just used the tools that we had. So, we continued using our email. We had a WhatsApp group with everyone and (brief pause) like, our team on the on the phone. And then we'd have, like, Zoom calls or, like, WhatsApp calls."* (Hannah)

*"(laughs) it is bad, it's so bad (laughs) I honestly just feel, like I've been, like plopped into the middle of every work environment I've, like entered and it's just, like "Now, go! Go!""* (Amelia)

#### 4.1.4.2. Demands and Resources

When asked about the resources and support provided from e-leaders, many participants expressed the unrealistic expectations that their e-leaders had of them when working in the digital environment. Employees were expected to deliver the same standard of work as they

were delivering in-person. Yet, working from home made it difficult for employees to meet this expectation. Consequently, despite not sufficiently providing employees with the necessary resources required to perform their remote work effectively, e-leaders became extremely demanding with little understanding for their employees:

*"But like, you know, the work started getting so much harder, cause now you're testing out, like a new- you know, because before when you were all locally connected to one server and so it was easy to access certain things but now it is all distributed IP addresses and all trying to remote into something. Server would become very slow and tedious. And obviously a lot of teething-issues with the applications. So, yeah, and during that time, you're still expected to deliver the same kind of work as you were delivering in an office where you had all of this high-speed sh*t, you know, and you had all of this access and capabilities but now you're working from home and you're sharing your WIFI with two guys playing video games and someone trading crypto currencies, it's not going to be the same, you know?"* (Eddie)

*"So yeah, it just (brief pause) it was just, like, very, very, very intense. There was no support. There was no guidance. If I had a question, like, about, like a client that I can't just go and research he'd be like, "Figure it out yourself", I'm like, but I can't. You met with the client. It's not for me to figure out. I wasn't there. I didn't hear the conversation"* (Hannah)

*"I think, you know, some managers may have a really, really high standard of the quality of work that they would produce, but they're not necessarily the ones doing the work"* (Erin)

*"It became a lot more demanding. It was, like if you weren't (brief pause) on call, untapped, 24/7 it was, like a huge problem. Whereas, when we were working in the office it was kind of, like, okay work ends at four thirty, it's done, but because we were then working from home, if something popped up at, like eight at night and you didn't answer the phone it would be a huge, huge, huge problem …"* (Hannah)

Furthermore, some participants did not feel that there was enough, or any, emotional support available from e-leaders. Some were only provided tangible support, such as physical equipment or financial support, by e-leaders. Due to the absence of emotional support offered by e-leaders, many participants felt that it was expected of them to merely "wing it":

"*So, yeah, I think, I think there was really no direct assistance from the leader apart from financial assistance to always be connected to, to get whatever software's that we needed that was provided to us, whatever that you feel should be, should be provided given to you to make your workstation to get the fastest internet et cetera. That was done. But the actual implementation of how we would work and that setup (brief pause) that, no. We had to wing it"* (Peter)

*"But, like financially supporting you with, like desks and whatever, that they did. But, emotionally preparing you for more work, more hours, more capacity to take on? Yeah, they didn't prepare. No one was prepared."* (Eddie)

*"I think maybe making space and time to, like chat about specific things, like to be conscious about, like (brief pause) I don't know, like, like what it is I'm doing, how I'm doing, (brief pause), yeah, I feel, like that, like emotional support is kind of lacking in general."* (Amelia)

Despite this issue of not being provided enough recourses, emotional or tangible, whilst demands increased within the virtual realm, Eddie believed that he did not have much of a say in terms of the operationalising of work being conducted online:

*"I just don't feel like there's much of a voice there. You know, if you are in a strong role that you don't have much voice, you just have to work until you're broken"* (Eddie)

However, some participants expressed that they do receive the adequate emotional support from their e-leader in navigating work in the digital realm:

*"I think when it comes to that, again, it's a matter of providing us with the tools that the company has available to help us. So, with the lifestyle company, [redacted], like all the resources that they have available (brief pause) something that, our leaders do is, you know, constantly, like, you know, inform us and remind us that that is available, because as much as they can check-in, you know, maybe not everyone's comfortable, or you don't have that relationship to open up to your colleagues about personal things and things like that. So, I think, yeah, just a constant reminder that, you know, these platforms are available for us to use has been like, you know, their way of support. And I think also just, like the wider leadership, having these, you know, these calls about mental health, and things like that, for you to join on a regular basis has also been- been, quite good, because a lot of them that I have joined, I was like, "That*

*was really helpful", you know. So, the fact that they're quite consistent with it, like they'll have one every Monday. I think it's quite nice for people to just, like take that break from work and say, "Right now, I'm focusing on, like learning about how I can build boundaries or break down, you know, walls" or something like that."* (Erin)

"*And it did, it did help that, you know, someone was quite senior as a partner, which is about as high as you can get in a team, would actually schedule, like one-on-ones with the team. And I mean, even now, we still more of a new thing ... but there are, like monthly meetings for people within your rank to share grievances, and those are at, at (brief pause) on Microsoft Teams"* (Arthur)

*"Yeah no, good, I would say. But I was blessed with a very good, in terms of, manager at* [redacted]*, so it was (brief pause) just a breeze really, and she did make sure that once a week she sat with each and every one of us and had an individual conversation. Not just about work, but about how we're doing on a personal level. So, yeah, at no point did you feel, like forgotten or that you weren't clear on what was expected of you. It was good."* (Sue)

*"So, one thing that's a more recent drive is setting up actual healthy, you know, work habits. So, in our in our team meetings, which happen every two weeks, they actually spend, a decent chunk of time of the hour, maybe ten to fifteen minutes, talking about, you know, healthy work life, balance. So, okay, asking (brief pause) saying okay, if (brief pause) so they actually take a poll, "How have you been doing recently? Good? Not-so-good? Well?" and in each week they, you know, they say, "Okay, if you're not in the not-so-good, here are some stuff that people found that helps, you know, manage stressful periods." And in the next, say, the next meeting, they'll actually do a comparison of the results from the previous poll and the current polls. If it's, like thirty percent so they're not doing so well. And this week, it's, five percent. So, they'll ask, you know, "What did you do to go from not so well, to doing okay, to doing well?" So, they share that around the team."* (Arthur)

Therefore, the majority of participants emphasised the significance for e-leaders to provide emotional support to their employees when operating in the digital domain:

*"And I think that is something that if they find a way to sort of, like measure people's, psycho-psychological like, like, okayness (chuckles) via a team's meeting then, yeah, sure that would be great cause just then by the responsiveness would be better"* (Eddie)

*"I think, because you don't have that, you know, person-to-person connection, I think it's really important that you find some way to check-in on how your people are doing."* (Arthur)

*"But definitely (pause), like, in-person, like I said, your manager can rely on, like body language and just observing you to see how you're doing and what you may need and when you look stressed. But they can't see that virtually. So, there's then- there needs to be a much bigger attention to how you're doing or if you're struggling or if you need assistance."* (Sue)

### *4.1.5. Greater Connectedness*

Connection in the virtual realm was described as a challenge for many respondents. The various sub-themes include limited social interactions, and awkwardness of online socialising.

#### 4.1.5.1. Limited Social Interactions

Due to the general limited exposure for social interactions to occur when working remotely, several participants stressed how imperative it is for e-leaders to be proactive in carving out the time and space for social interactions to occur and initiate social activates amongst virtual teams to allow them to feel connected as this is not always a priority for e-leaders:

*"I think, I mean, I think the challenges in terms of not connecting as well to people online as you would maybe in-person, like I said, like especially with the Exec kind of level of people not really having that opportunity to connect or rather not making that opportunity to connect. So, I think that's something that can be fixed."* (Jade)

*"She, like every two months, she'll have a meeting with us one-on-one where she sets it up so she can see all of us, over this basic two months, just to check-in. And it's not like a, it's not really a work, it doesn't have to be a work meeting, it can be a personal chit-chat kind of a thing. So, that's something that I really appreciate because she is super busy, but she still puts in a little bit of effort to, like connect."* (Jade)

Moreover, e-leaders must actively make the effort to generate and maintain interpersonal relationships with their employees since it is more challenging doing so in the virtual environment as compared to working in-person:

*"So, yeah, I feel like if you don't actively try, you know, as with any friendship, really, you don't actively try to maintain it, it's going to start falling by the wayside. Yeah, because we don't see*

*each other, and I guess it's very easy to become friends with your boss when you see them all the time. It's now much more difficult to maintain that same sort of relationship. And like before my boss used to play golf with, like the employees but now, now not so much. So, yeah, I mean, I didn't come here for the golf but, like it would have been nice to be asked (laughs). Yeah, so you know, I mean, in that respect, working from home doesn't help people's relationships easily"* (Eddie)

*"She, like every two months, she'll have a meeting with us one-on-one where she sets it up so she can see all of us, over this basic two months, just to check-in. And it's not like a, it's not really a work, it doesn't have to be a work meeting, it can be a personal chit-chat kind of a thing. So, that's something that I really appreciate because she is super busy, but she still puts in a little bit of effort to, like connect.*" (Jade)

#### 4.1.5.2. Awkwardness of Online Socializing

Many participants noted the shift in social interactions taking place virtually. The difficulty initiating these social activities amongst virtual teams for e-leaders was brought forward as not everyone is open or willing to engage and e-leaders may not know how to connect with their employees virtually:

*"Yeah, it's crazy. Like, literally there will be meetings where, obviously we know, "Okay, this is the agenda for the meeting", but you obviously don't wanna, we're not robots that will join the call and try and have, like a quick conversation. But it'll be really quick, like some people don't wanna answer questions or just talk at all and it's just like, "Okay, well this is kinda awkward, like, okay I guess we'll just have to start, you know, talking about work", and they actually tried something with us. I think, like peak COVID, like 2020, they started doing, like these different, like techniques that you could take into your Teams meetings and one of them was have the first five to fifteen minutes just chatting, about, you know, don't dive straight into the work, like connect and just, you know, small talk, chat. But yeah, that would be sometimes very gruelling (chuckles) five to twenty minutes and then other times it was pretty fun, but yeah."* (Erin)

*"However, not everyone communicates on an online meeting, you know? You can't ask someone "How has your workweek been?" And especially your boss can't ask you this in front of your other colleagues who are also on the call? You're not gonna say, like "Look dude, I'm having a really hard time. This is bullsh*t" sorry, but you know."* (Eddie)

*"Also, like (sighs) finding a way to be personable, like virtually, that isn't, like I dunno, like fraught, you know? Like, like, not necessarily, like start every meeting with a check-in, where everyone in the meeting has to say again, like "How are you doing today? What colour are you?", you know? It's just maybe, like a conversation (brief pause) instead?"* (Amelia)

*"It was pretty much the same, like some people would be really open to it. So, like, if, for example, like if you had, like a call between five people, you'd probably get, like the manager who obviously has to be the one leading the call, trying to initiate this and you'll get maybe two people that are, you know, quite keen and they're responding and stuff, and then you'll get the others, the other two that are, like pretty quiet most the time and they just want to know, "okay, like what is the project, what is this?"* (Erin)

### *4.1.6. Effortful Leadership*

What became evident in the data was that e-leaders must exert more effort when leading employees in the digital sphere. Several participants believe that the mere essence of what constitutes e-leadership requires greater effort to be exerted by e-leaders in order to lead effectively:

*"I think in general, it requires, you know, dropping messages in regularly to the team members checking-in, on where they're at and, you know, making suggestions along the way, which (brief pause) I think sort of happens naturally when you're in-person. But it requires a little bit more, almost, like an extra, extra bit of kind of thinking and motivation to (brief pause) it's, it's almost, like a, like a little bit of extra effort to make it happen virtually"* (Noah)

*"I think, I think, that there needs to be more effort, I mean e-leadership partly makes that connection and, because, I think, for example if you're in the office, you can see your, your direct reports and you can see maybe someone's not doing well today or maybe someone is slacking off or whatever it is. I think that there needs to be a lot more check-ins with e-leadership than you would in-person because (dog barking) you don't see the person, you don't know what they're doing or how they're doing."* (Jade)

*"Like, al-almost everything can be mitigated, or can be dealt with if you just put a little bit of effort in."* (Sue)

*"I think the only difference between, like a leader and an e-leader would be that an e-leader would probably have to put in more effort to get those characteristics across. And to maintain that connection between their employees because obviously it's a bit harder to build those relationships on an online platform."* (Hannah)

*"I'm not sure if it can be fully translated. I feel, like an entirely new approach to management is necessary because you can't see the people (brief pause) in-person, you're, more than ever, have to rely on, like an output-based (brief pause) w-way of tracking performance, which cannot, like see if they're working, you cannot see when they're working, you have to just look at (brief pause) is, is the work getting done? That's really the only way … but that attention to, to your staff needs to increase, I think y-you also, you cannot see if someone's having a tough time, you cannot see if someone is sick. You have to make sure you check-in with them virtually and ask."* (Sue)

It became evident from the data, that more effort is required from, not only e-leaders themselves, but employees as well, with specific reference to virtual communication:

*"… but I think definitely, you know, versus being in their workspace when they're right there for you to ask questions was, I think, a lot easier in certain aspects in terms of, like yeah, typing a lengthy email or, you know, having yeah, well yeah just, like trying to set up calls with them and get the, you know, certain people that you need available to be there to help has been quite limiting in a lot of instances"* (Erin)

*"I think at least in the first few weeks, figuring out how to do this, figuring out, like how to, like, schedule meetings and not having someone to, like speak to, like, like, turn to next to you. And so that it means in order to figure out how to do something you have to, like call, another intern or call a manager, and set up a whole fu*cking thing, like a whole Zoom call, you know, to figure out how to, like schedule a Zoom, like conference or something (laughs) webinar."* (Amelia)

*"Yeah, it's, it's quick to pop your head into someone's office and just ask a quick question. Whereas, any question has to be, like physically communicated either over a message or email. And obviously that then takes a bit more time to get feedback from"* (Hannah)

*They have a big thing, like they said the "Watercooler talk" (brief pause) that were in an office space. Face-to-face leadership, you get to just, like run over to your manager and ask this, while virtually you have to, like make the effort to, I don't know, send-send the message, send the email, which I think a lot of people procrastinate doing."* (Sue)

### *4.1.7. Trust (Control vs Freedom)*

The next theme that emerged from the data constituted trust, whether it is provided to employees or not, and, subsequently, what this entails for virtual teams and e-leaders:

#### 4.1.7.1. A Micromanagement E-Leadership Style Adopted as a Result of Low Trust:

The majority of the participants mentioned their dislike towards a micromanagement leadership style, with some participants having had a micromanager as an e-leader. According to these participants, managing this style of leadership was regarded as more challenging in the virtual setting than it was in-person:

*"Some people don't like a manager, like hovering over them and, and looking over their shoulder all the time."* (Sue)

*"And so, okay, my first manager was very needy, very, very needy and when I was around them physically, it was hard to even get things done for myself, you know, I'd always be answering to their beck and call. And, you know, it actually (brief pause) it was, it was manageable, face-to-face. However, that micromanagement style that they had, could not be done over Teams. So, it became even worse, it became very stressful and, you know, the Team's ringtone it will give you shivers, you know, you get it late at night or something"* (Eddie)

*"Yeah, I think he kind of overcompensated for that lack of control about o-, the lack of control over not knowing exactly what we're doing. He overcompensated by being over controlling, not trusting at all. E-every day we had to, like submit timesheets, which were, like half an hour gaps. So, every half an hour you had to fill in, like what you did, what you were doing. If you took lunch, you had to put that in. Like, everything you had to put in. So, yeah, it, it, it created a very, like anxious atmosphere. Like, it would be seven in the morning when I'd wake up and I'd be, like, "Oh my gosh, what if he needs something and I've now slept". Whereas work only started at eight thirty kind of thing. So, yeah, there was definitely a big shift."* (Hannah)

This lack of trust and micromanagement described by Hannah is something that many other participants believe is not a positive quality for e-leaders to possess. Rather, e-leaders must have a level of trust and understanding that employees are going to deliver and complete their work when operating virtually:

*"Too, too much of a micromanager I believe that is a very bad quality especially to have over the internet job or, I mean, something as autonomous as what we are in today. Micromanaging, I think, it'll just drive a person insane, you know, it's hard enough getting work done at the office because of all the noise and things but, you know, now you take away that noise. You try to come home, and you want to do your work quietly and peacefully, get your best qualities out there. But, if you're getting micromanaged, you don't, that time goes away because now you're focused on trying to please someone rather than actually focused on delivering. So, micromanaging, I think, is a completely dreadful characteristic to have as, as a leader during work from home situation."* (Eddie)

*"I really don't agree with company's doing those things where they, like track your desktop activity and such. I feel like that's (brief pause) almost just, like watching people like a hawk. I feel, like a lot more trust is needed (brief pause) to go into e-leadership."* (Sue)

*"Mmmm. So, yeah, as I said, I don't think a leader should do the whole, like monitoring your desktop or your mouse clicks or something weird like that. I think that's very jail-like."* (Sue)

Additionally, e-leaders who implement check-in practices must be mindful of how often they should take place, as if these occur too frequently, it may be perceived as a form of control, demonstrate a lack of trust, add pressure to employees, or come off as pushy:

*"And I think it's important to find some way to actually track progress on tasks and without, you know, without being pushy about it. So (brief pause), like I hate daily catch ups they're the worst (laughs) the absolute worst, but you know, checking in every two days or setting up calls, like, you know, a week before a deadline to see how things are going. But yeah, I think just finding some way to monitor progress without being too pushy, given that you don't have direct oversight in the way you would if you were in-person, finding some way to, you know, see how the team is actually doing given that you don't have a personal touch"* (Arthur)

*"I have had certain experiences where I think certain managers were just, taking on a lot and then I would get very flustered because even though you still have regular check-ins, sometimes they were too often. So, like every day they wanted an update on my peer … so, it's like I don't really know what you expected to change (chuckles) from what happened yesterday, or, you know, like what- (brief pause) I don't know, drastic, you know, updates you would require, but I just felt in certain instances there was a lot of pressure from certain managers …"* (Erin)

#### 4.1.7.2. Greater Levels of Trust Established Amongst E-leaders:

Conversely, other participants believed that micromanagement is more difficult to occur digitally than in-person as the physical absence of leaders make it possible for them to complete their work and experience greater levels of flexibility:

*"Mmm. Yeah, I just, I really see a lot of positives there because it sort of drives you into taking ownership of the work that you do, you know, without anyone micromanaging that. You have to complete the tasks that you have at hand. You have to put in extra hours and you're a lot more flexible. Especially without someone breathing behind your back, telling you that they need something like this. Even if they are seeing, you cannot see them. So, it makes it a lot easier to take your own time and carrying out whatever work tasks that you had diligently and that has really been the positive on my end."* (Peter)

*"I think it's more difficult for someone to micromanage you virtually than it is to for them to do it in-person. And I think (sighs) that's something I wouldn't respond well to. So, I think you know, having the flexibility in that space to work independently is, is something I do appreciate."* (Arthur)

Sue and Eddie stated that trust was apparent from their e-leaders as there was not a need to consistently check-in on them and the rest of the virtual team:

*"But there was always, also enough space for, like (brief pause) you know, trusting that everyone's doing their work and we don't have to check up on each other all the time."* (Sue)

*"So, I think, I think if I'm very honest, I think like, I don't speak, you know, maybe it's like once a week I speak to a manager, right now. He knows, he's comfortable with what I'm doing. He knows what I'm doing only if there's a situation would we actually have to reach out to each other, but I guess that's just the space I'm in."* (Eddie)

### 4.2. Results from Leaders' Interviews:

There were approximately five themes and several related subthemes that emerged for leaders, which constituted the following themes: Knowledge Share and Learning in the Virtual World; Instilling Motivation as an E-leader; The Need to Humanise the Remote Work Experience; Ease of Accessibility and Boundaries; and The Development of E-leadership Skills. These are discussed below:

#### *4.2.1. Knowledge Share and Learning in the Virtual World:*

Many respondents spoke about the difficulty of creating and experiencing learning opportunities and knowledge share in the virtual sphere as an e-leader:

In other words, e-leaders expressed the difficulty of providing virtual teams the exposure needed for knowledge sharing and learning opportunities for their virtual teams as compared to leading in-person:

*"I think I've got a challenge at the moment, for example. I do have somebody in my team that's quite young and is not nearly as experienced as my other OD consultants. And I think even though all the members in the team are industrial psychologists, I think for her not having had that collaboration with her colleagues is definitely starting to show, you know. Where she would've gained better experience by being there in-person, learning from her colleagues, etcetera that's not happening at the moment. So, it's almost the lack of exposure but also having her learn those- those social skills with-with, like building relationships with executives, with the leadership cadres, etcetera. That's probably the biggest challenge I have at the moment and that is trying to- almost teach somebody that virtually, is very difficult."* (Claire)

Claire specifically highlighted difficulty building up one of her virtual team member's confidence when operating as an e-leader:

*"You know, I'm receiving complaints that she's not engaging, that she's not getting involved in the business but that's a confidence thing so try to build people's confidence virtually is very difficult ... Whereas in the past you could kind of just go with them to the meeting and, you know, kind of coach and guide them through that. Now it's a lot more difficult to-to do and ja, I-I haven't quite figured that one out yet."* (Claire)

Craig further stated that although there are technological avenues for e-leaders to use as a means of learning, such as Google, it is more challenging to engage in knowledge share and learning opportunities when e-leading as opposed to leading in-person. He, thereby, believes that the physical office space can better promote one's development:

*"A lot of the efforts to, to get used to this new technology can be more difficult because if, if you're at the office, and if there's, like readily, like lot of resources available ... let's say you want to learn a bit more about Excel and, like how to, to, get used to that. I think working virtually and working at the office similar, you can, you can kinda, like Google things, learn things but perhaps at the office, you'll be able to pick up on skills and techniques that other, that other people at the office are doing. So, perhaps your growth can be accelerated at the office"* (Craig)

*"And then sometimes just being in the office, and, and (brief pause) not, even if you're not involved in a project, but perhaps you sometimes hear about certain concepts being spoken about, you do tend to, to learn a little bit more. So, I think for growth and development sometimes the arrangement could be a bit better"* (Craig)

*"The other thing is that if there are systems and processes that are exclusive to your company, it makes it a lot more challenging to be able to pick up these skills virtually so that would be one."* (Craig)

Despite the difficulty for e-leaders and virtual teams to experience adequate knowledge share online, some participants noticed that working remotely creates alternative opportunities for learning and growth to occur that were not previously made possible when working in-person:

*"In the past we used to sit in an open plan environment where we all sat together, and it used to be very easy just to swivel in your chair and ask me for a solution or an answer or whatever the case may be. Now what happens is, is that because it's not that easy to do anymore, they actually got to think through. So, their problem-solving skills become far more enhanced. Their ability to think through and come up with solutions now becomes something that - that's more practiced than it would have been in the past. I think also in terms of being able to manage projects and, you know, especially dealing with executives for argument' sake, they're forced to deal with those type of things themselves because it's not that easy just to, you know, pop around the corner and ask me for the solution."* (Claire)

*"So, I think the biggest, the biggest thing is that it's forced people to engage with technology but also embrace it. So, I think it's really been around personal development that has grown significantly. I mean, we've got people now in my team that are doing Power BI courses to do, you know, spreadsheets and that type of thing for data analyses which would have never happened in the past."* (Claire)

*"Because in the past you know being face-to-face you could see everything. Now you got to rely on data to give you information that you could probably have seen in-person previously. And I think what was also very interesting is the number of people that are starting to do different programming workshops and courses to try and enhance their skills from being able to create, you know, or being able to do coding and stuff like that. So, I think that- that's probably been the biggest thing is development, personal development."* (Claire)

*"… so, I think from that perspective my team has grown significantly in that they're able to- (brief pause) they're learning management skills that would be very difficult for me to kind of teach them in a-a in-person type of environment at the office, so they really are great from that perspective."* (Claire)

*"I think probably for me the biggest, the biggest benefit of e-leadership was really I think personal development for people. I think it's forced people to grow and develop themselves in spaces that they would never have ventured before."* (Claire)

### *4.2.2. Instilling Motivation as an E-leader*

Several participants highlighted the need as e-leaders to stimulate their virtual teams since it is easier to disengaged working virtually.

Participants expressed the importance of replicating the office environment and atmosphere online to ensure stimulation and engagement is attained for virtual teams and e-leaders themselves:

*"I think one of the things that's hard is atmosphere, you can't bring atmosphere in through a screen. So, I think as an e-leader, being very aware of- (brief pause) making sure your team enjoy is (brief pause) trying to get your team to enjoy what they're doing, I think is very important, like trying to create as much of an atmosphere as you can online"* (Alyssa)

*"So, I think, we just have those things to encourage to tr-try and simulate that office environment cause it's easy to catch up with people in the office, but, but it's more challenging virtually."* (Craig)

*"I would say ensuring that people are engaged. The, the other one is keep people engaged so, creating an environment where people can, can perform well"* (Craig)

It is much easier to become disengaged online not only for virtual teams, but for e-leaders themselves:

*"Sometimes, if I'm sitting and I find something really boring, I'll start doing other stuff, you know what I mean? I-I am one of those males that can do more than one thing at a time, so I'm still listening to the stuff in the background, and somebody asks me a question, I know exactly where the conversation's been. But I-I can disengage from something fairly quickly as well so yeah, that is, that is one of the downsides."* (Ben)

*"Also to take care of the energy that you portray to your team as well is also quite important. Because you can easily have your off days and stuff like that, but you don't want it to get worse by portraying, like low energy to your, t-to your team because then they get disincentivize as well, so yeah, so t-to try and be in control of that …"* (Craig)

*"The other thing to not do is to, to assume that, that people will know exactly why certain things are being done. So, yeah, so taking that for granted, I think, can lead to challenges because it's nice to provide that "Why's" so that people are, yeah, incentivised and motivated to work, understand exactly why certain things are being done."* (Craig)

Craig mentioned the usage of social newsletters as a frequent strategy employed within his organisation to replicate the office environment as well as to encourage engagement:

*"What we've done is, like we've created so we have to bring engagement and different people will, will be working on different things but what we've done is we've come up with, like a social, like newsletter. So, at the end of each month, we will, like send something out and we'll get, it'll be, like a collaboration between members of, like our social committee and, like we'll have a section in the newsletter to be about a specific person in the team, or people who are joining the team, people who are leaving the team events that have occurred in the team. So, I think, we just have those things to encourage to tr-try and simulate that office environment*

*cause it's easy to catch up with people in the office, but, but it's more challenging virtually. And the main reason is to, like keep people motivated, more engaged as well"* (Craig)

Ben noticed that the virtual tools available and the very nature of remote work enabled greater engagement and participation as many employees felt more comfortable interacting within the virtual space:

*"Yeah, yeah, I mean, so with the tools available so, if you use Miro or Mural or something like that, you know, again, now because you have to use those whereas before you're in a workshop. You'd have people come write stuff on a flip chart or on a board. Now again, if you, if you're quite an introvert, you, you feel a little bit pressured to do that. So, you might not do that. Whereas, in Miro or Mural it's no problem, you know? I'm gonna take a sticky and I'm gonna put it on and, and, and it works well. So, you get much better, I think, much better participation in your, in your virtual workshops"* (Ben)

*"It allows everybody to participate and not just the, the big mouths and the extroverts and whatever, I think it allows everybody …"* (Ben)

### *4.2.3. The Need to Humanise the Remote Working Experience:*

This theme embodies the need for e-leaders to "humanise" the technologically mediated workspace. Relevant sub-themes constitute practices to humanise the name behind the screen, technological tools and platforms used to humanise remote work, the need for e-leaders to cultivate a presence in the virtual realm, and relationships with virtual teams. Many participants acknowledged the removal of human qualities when working remotely:

*"... (pauses), and also, people not having that, that human contact. I think that's the downside of being virtual all the time. You know, when you were in office, you'd you hear about the "watercooler talk" and, you know, whatever it is and people socialising a lot more and now with, with, with virtual it's, it's, it's quite clinical"* (Ben)

The practice of storytelling enabled Ben, an e-leader, to humanise the names and faces behind the screen amongst his virtual team:

*"So, we brought in a- a very unique way (laughs)- I think it's a fairly unique way of doing this and it's- it's through storytelling ... Okay so, so everybody went through COVID in a different way. I think we all knew people that- that died or were seriously ill, and we all experienced it*

*differently. So, one of the things we did, most probably be about six months ago, is just say, "Okay so, tell us- tell us the story about your experience of COVID, not the whole thing, just- just pick on one thing and just talk about it". And then allowing other people in the team to say, "Okay so, what did it make you feel like, like this," or "What did you do about that?" So, what we actually did, what it did was bring the- bring this picture that I see on the screen of Chloe, back into Chloe being an actual real person who-who – I'm not saying that the- the virtual part doesn't make you a real person, but it brings it back to people understanding each other a lot better and we called it "Reconnecting", you know, by-through storytelling. So, we've used storytelling and- and we've actually used that successfully with other teams as well. With clients is to reconnect their teams through storytelling"* (Ben)

*"So, there's no judgment on it, it's actually everybody feels very empathetic when they hear the stories."* (Ben)

Respondents emphasised the use of some technological tools and features that e-leaders can utillise to humanise the experience of working virtually for their virtual teams:

*"Emojis do help. I do tend to use a lot of (brief pause) a lot of emojis given that things are virtual"* (Craig)

*"So, you kind of just take that into your leadership role as well, like I sometimes literally just have GIF conversations with my team and, you know, it's just hilarious so (chuckles)."* (Alyssa)

*"...regular check-ins, so, trying to chat to them a bit more often ensuring that there is space and time to, to, chat about general things as well and have those conversations, whether it's, like sending memes and, like GIFs and stuff like that ..."* (Craig)

A common technological feature and tool employed by e-leaders was the utilization of cameras. As Ben and Alyssa described, the use of having cameras and microphones on amongst virtual teams enables e-leaders to better gauge with people's emotions, read body language, and understand levels of engagement better:

"*I think another thing that's become very important is checking up on people, making sure they're okay, because you can't see them. A lot of people don't do video anymore. So, we, we, like really encourage video at our office. We always, we want people to show their faces all*

*the time and, and I think (brief pause) you can't always gauge someone's physical emotions, you know, as easily as you can when you're in-person ....*" (Alyssa)

"*I think it comes back to this camera-on, camera-off situation, and it's the only one I can think of because I love the virtual world, but if I'm, if I'm sitting in a room with you, it's very easy for me to see your body language, and body language often is much stronger (laughs) than spoken language*." (Ben)

*"I think, I think another thing has been, especially e-leadership-wise, showing faces so you can see each other's emotions, and a little bit of the physical, like responses. I think showing faces is really, really important."* (Alyssa)

"*And I-I think video makes a very big difference to be able to see the person you're talking to and it's not just, like a voice on the other side of the screen.*" (Alyssa)

"*It's, it's really difficult as a leader who's present if you're presenting or briefing or whatever, but you're talking to people and you're talking to a screen of off cameras, on mute. And it's just silence, to now have to (brief pause) try create some engagement or like, check- (brief pause) "are you understanding, like are you following? Are you even there?" (chuckles) you know"* (Alyssa)

However, Alyssa expressed difficulty with her virtual team following this practice of switching cameras on. Thus, some e-leaders have had to actively encourage cameras and microphones to be switched on amongst virtual teams to ensure that this practice has been followed:

*"At the beginning it was the norm for people to not turn their cameras on. Like, I think everyone (brief pause) because I think everyone was like, "Oh my gosh, I can just roll out of bed and go to work" (chuckles), you know? So, like no one was, like brushing their hair or everyone was unpresentable, so no one really had videos on, and our company actually started, enforcing it a little bit. It's like, you really need to have videos on in meetings ..."* (Alyssa)

*"Like (sighs) I wouldn't say we enforce it, like you're gonna I don't know, get a decrease in your salary if you don't (laughs) do this. But we just really encourage it and I think as an e-leader on my side I really, really, really try to encourage it to have camera on and I, like ask my, my team to in client meetings to "Please turn your camera on, even if you're just sitting listening, like please have your camera on"* (Alyssa)

Although identified as challenging, Craig emphasised the critical need for e-leaders to cultivate a digital presence as a means of humanising the experience of remote work for virtual teams. This can be achieved through the use of communication to express one's personality, as well as allow for more social engagements to occur before initiating discussions relating to work with virtual teams:

*"I've tried to be a bit more creative in the way I communicate. So that, like (brief pause) like, my personality is like, also, like (brief pause) comes across, like (chuckles) with, like the, the way I message about, like certain things. So, it helps the team, like learn a little bit more about you so that you try to simulate that environment a bit better."* (Craig)

*"The other thing is to try and be creative virtually to ensure that engagements and stuff are still- (brief pause) are still a bit more fun and (not just, like people suffering in, in silos. Soo, (brief pause) examples of that would beee,) having a bit more of, like a general chat with, with people in the team, before, like really talking about, like items of work that need to be done, if there's time for that, obviously cause that needs to be balanced. But yeah, just ensuring that there is a bit more of that, like the hu-human interaction."* (Craig)

#### *4.2.4. Ease of Accessibility and Boundaries:*

Due to the nature of remote work, virtual teams may not have the same degree of accessibility to their e-leaders as before when working face-to-face. Thus, several participants stipulated the significance of being available and accessible to their virtual teams as an e-leader:

*"I think making time to provide support is really important for me, because I think you're (brief pause) I mean, you're, you're responsible for running projects, so you're busy (brief pause) answering client mails and managing roadmaps and doing a lot of budget conversations and I think you can very easily not check-in with your team or not check that they have the support they need, so I think it's very important to make time to check-in, you know?"* (Alyssa)

"*I-I'd like to think that I, I leave the floor open for questions and I'm quite accommodating when it comes to them being unsure of what needs to happen so, if so, I am available for any questions at any time. So, even though my boundaries are set, I've tried my best not to ever make it feel like they can't contact me, or that they can't ask questions, try not to make anything feel, like a, a silly question …" (*Madison*)*

*"I think regular communication but in a, in a predetermined setting, so to set times where you're willing and available to meet on a regular basis that you know, if there are questions to be asked you are available, but on your own terms."* (Madison)

Prior to working remotely, participants highlighted that the ease of access was greater when working in-person as the action of simply "popping over" to one's desk to seek information or for simple social interaction was possible. This, unfortunately, is no longer viable in the digital realm:

*"There's a bit of a lack of, like a social interaction sometimes. So, that does make it bit more challenging cause it's a bit easier to just go to someone's desk and just ask them, like "Cool, have you seen this before?" or "Can you explain this?" or "How, how are things going on the engagements?"* (Craig)

"*I think, when everyone's at the office, it's very easy to just quickly grab each other and talk and, you know, things are, you can just kind of tap someone on the shoulder and have a quick discussion and, like there's that energy in the room and, you know, I think now with remote work you have to schedule in meetings if you want to just quickly ask someone a question, it's (brief pause) you have to check if they're online and stuff like that.*" (Alyssa)

*"So, you can sort of encroach on each other's space a bit because, because you don't know, you don't know what somebody's busy doing, or if they need more time for something or how progress is going all the time. You can't just pop over to their desk."* (Madison)

Yet, this removal has had positive implications for some participants:

*"And it sounds odd being an HR person, it used to irritate me, you know, being interrupted by people. I think that was the biggest thing, is sitting at your desk, you could never actually just sit and focus and concentrate and do work (brief pause) and I think that's one of the biggest benefits I have at the moment is that, you know, you can shut down for two hours and do focused, concentrated, thinking work, which we're never able to do at, at the office"* (Claire)

*"I actually used to get quite frustrated with people stopping at my desk to have a chat (laughs) ... because I know I've got work to do, you know, and if, if I chat for twenty minutes it means I've got twenty minutes of work to do tonight when I get home, because, you know, I'm there to do a job, and I mean, it's nice, it's, it's nice to have fun and it's nice to laugh and joke and*

*carry on, but- but- but there's a time and a place for that (laughs) and, and I think that can be overdone in, in a physical workspace, yeah."* (Ben)

According to Madison, the digital sphere has made it possible for her to consistently be available and accessible to her virtual team. Yet, this has been proven to be challenging for her:

*"And then what, what adds a bit of frustration to it is, like I said, when you're available at any time, so he can WhatsApp me at any time in the day with an update. And I feel that he will be waiting on me until I reply to that, but I might be in the middle of something else that's important. And then I'm distracted from that. So, I'm feeling very distracted throughout the day because my attention is being pulled in different directions, at any time, whereas if we were in-person, somebody might see okay, I'm very busy with something, you know, come, can I come back later or whatever the case is, but you know, when you're on the other side of a phone, they have no idea if you're just you know sitting on the couch waiting for them or if you're right in the middle of something."* (Madison)

*"So, pretty obviously the main difference is that in an office, you might have very set times, everyone has a similar lunch break. You have a set schedule of things. We come into the office at certain times. We may have meetings at certain times. You're always there and available within those parameters, but then from 5pm, you go home and you're, you're not available. That, those all fall away when you work like this because if something needs to be done later, somebody can always reach you and that's your main platform of work so"* (Madison)

Some of the respondents stated that leading in the online space as an e-leader fostered blurred boundaries:

*"One of the negatives of that is that sometimes, people can get overworked, and you do tend to work at odd hours during the day."* (Craig)

*"Another negative is that, is that dissociation between, where you're living versus where you're working sometimes it can get a bit tricky and, that can have a bit of an impact* (Craig)

*"And I think the other big challenge has been working too much because you don't have that separation between home and work. So, it was very easy, when you're working from home, it's very easy to just kind of keep working until 8pm because you just don't switch off, you know,*

*or you can quickly run into your office, and, like, get something done. So, actually working too much. So, that's also been, a thing is setting, setting boundaries"* (Alyssa)

*"What we did find coming back, like whenever our clients was* [redacted] *and one of the people there said, you know, beforehand, a Friday, like three, four o'clock in the afternoon before COVID, everybody started, you know, sort of moving out the office and, you know, Friday night was Friday night. Now, all of a sudden people, the manager realizes, "Okay, well, I'll just set a meeting for seven o'clock on a Friday evening, because, you know, where are you going to be?" (chuckles) especially during COVID when you weren't meant to be travelling anyway or going anyway""* (Ben)

As a result, respondents stressed the significance of establishing and refining boundaries when working remotely as an e-leader for both themselves and for their virtual teams:

*"There was definitely a learning curve that we had to go through to figure out the flow of everything and try and set boundaries because obviously, if you're, if you're working that way, and unnecessarily set hours or, you know, people might want to phone you all the time. And that distracts you from your job and because they're not seeing the direction that you're being pulled in all day by other people, they might think that time only belongs to them"* (Madison)

*"Then the people involved in that process need to be aware from the beginning that it might entail some later hours and that they can take back those hours the next day if they would want to or whatever the case is, but that's something that we've had to refine and I've had to also find with the clients to say these are the hours that we work if there's something urgent we'll do this but we need some sort of warning. And as I said, been a process to try and refine so that I don't overwork my employee"* (Madison)

*"... I mean, I won't contact my team over the weekend, past five o'clock, unless it's something critically urgent."* (Ben)

*"Now people actually have had to start setting their out of office times and stuff and to say like, "I'm not working at four anymore, I'm gone", you know? They put that in their calendar so that people don't book (chuckles) meetings in that spot, you know"* (Alyssa)

### *4.2.5. The Development of E-leadership Skills*

This theme constitutes the various skills and abilities developed within the context of e-leadership. Craig stated that leading remotely requires e-leaders to improve their teaching and training abilities:

*"Like, it's forced you to be a lot clearer as well with like, explaining things and being able to, like transfer certain skills to, to people that don't have skills in a particular area.... I think it's, it's taught you a bit more about, like how to teach certain concepts and maybe perhaps think about it."* (Craig)

Additionally, many of the respondents articulated the various skills that they have learnt leading online as an e-leader, such as being emotionally available, adapting a coaching perspective, as well as practicing greater social skills:

*"Being a leader, you know, it-it, that, that is difficult, but I would definitely say being more emotionally aware, you know, I think cause I'm quite a (brief pause) task-driven person. I'm kind of just like, "This is what we need to do, let's do it" you know, like let's just get down to it, forget the fluff, you know, whatever. I'm just like, "Let's just do what needs to be done", and I've definitely had to practice that side a lot more of being a lot more emotionally available for my team ..."* (Alyssa)

*"If anything, I used to mentor more than I used to coach and I'm now coaching more than I'm mentoring. I think that's probably the easiest way to put it. You know, from a mentoring perspective in the past I used to have to tell them what to do, whereas now it's a case of I'm in- I'm in the space where I'm rather asking them for the solutions and more coaching than I would have mentored in the past."* (Claire)

*"... and practicing that social skill of entertaining and interacting and asking how you're doing and stuff. But I don't know if that (brief pause) I-I think all leaders need to have that social skill, I think it's critical"* (Alyssa)

*"So, I-I don't think I... I think I lead very differently now than what I did ... you know, pre, pre the hybrid workforce model for argument' sake or the e-leadership space."* (Claire)

However, other respondents expressed that they have not changed that much being in the e-leadership space:

*"So, I think I've slowly evolved with it and then come into a leadership role where I was already sort of equipped with the tools to make that work."* (Madison)

*"So, I, you know, I-I don't think I've changed a lot in, in the way that I lead"* (Ben)

# Chapter 5: Discussion of Findings

As mentioned previously, this study aims to contribute to the existing body of limited research and literature on e-leadership, and by doing so, can aid organisational e-leaders lead successfully, which will enhance their ability to accomplish their goals and objectives. By exploring both employees and leaders' experiences of e-leadership, this research study aims to gain a richer understanding of the leadership phenomenon. As such, the following research questions were developed:

1.) What are employees lived experiences being led by e-leaders within current working conditions (i.e., operating within a hybrid-working approach or full-time remote work)?
2.) What are leaders lived experiences leading as an e-leader within current working conditions (i.e., operating within a hybrid-working approach or full-time remote work)?

Before presenting the discussion below, it is imperative to note that the various aspects constituting e-leadership that have emerged as themes and sub-themes are all interconnected and, thus, cannot be solely discussed in isolation. For instance, Walvoord et al (2008) asserts that e-leaders who are proficient at projecting their online presence and who are able to effectively convey their intentions through information communication technology (ICT) are able to retain greater engagement from virtual teams. Thus, the dispersion of the following key insights are all integrated. Furthermore, the discussion will be presented in accordance with the research questions formerly mentioned.

## 5.1. Research Question 1: What are employees lived experiences being led by e-leaders within current working conditions (i.e., operating within a hybrid-working approach or full-time remote work)?

### *5.1.1. Communication:*

The findings of this study demonstrate that, depending on numerous variables, such as technical platforms, functionality and features available, communication can both be effective and ineffective in the digital domain. Virtual communication was deemed reliable and effective by some respondents, while others regarded it as being unreliable and ineffective due to connectivity and technological concerns. Moreover, several respondents stated that they felt limited by virtual communication in their capacity to make their points clearly understood, which may result in misunderstandings. This partially concurs with existing studies that

illustrate the increased likelihood of misunderstandings when conversing virtually (Gupta & Pathak, 2018; Van Wart et al., 2019; Darics, 2020). According to Pitkänen (2021) and Wojcak et al. (2016), the non-verbal and paraverbal cues that are present in traditional office settings are removed when communicating online, rendering it more challenging to comprehend the context of messages.

When communicating online, e-leaders must focus on communication clarity, which Cortellazzo et al. (2019) defines as explicit and well-organised communication that provides opportunities for feedback to eschew the occurrence of errors and unproven assumptions. Geister at al. (2006) regards communication clarity as a critical competency for e-leaders to possess when leading their virtual teams. As such, it is important for e-leaders to adopt communication clarity to ensure that they are communicating clearly and with intention in order to avoid confusion.

The results of this study also demonstrate the importance of frequent communication by e-leaders. Previous research has demonstrated the value of frequent communication offered by e-leaders as it is one of the components creates effective communication. Other factors that constitute effective communication include quantity as well as the accuracy of information exchange (Gallenkamp et al., 2011 as cited in Lilian, 2014). Thereby, frequent and effective communication is essential for successful e-leadership (Even, 2021; Horwitz, 2006). Since the virtual environment poses major challenges for effective communication, simple information exchange may not be adequate (Walvoord et al., 2008). As demonstrated within the findings of this study, the establishment and frequent revision of explicit communication guidelines and norms within virtual teams can be argued to be among one of the most essential practices for e-leaders to employ. Leaders of virtual teams must set rigorous guidelines with reference to not only "when" and "what" to communicate, but also "how" to communicate (Bergiel et al., 2008). Further indicating that new leadership skills are required for the digital era (Jawadi et al., 2013; Trivedi & Desai, 2012).

#### *5.1.2. Difficulty Inspiring and Showing Charisma:*

Leaders now have a variety of opportunities to communicate with their team members due to the proliferation of new communication technologies (Korzynski, 2015). Thereby, there is a critical need for effective e-leadership that will assist organisations to adjust to the new practices of remote work as well as maintain employees' level of motivation despite a lack of

physical contact (Contreras et al., 2020). The findings suggest that feeling a sense of motivation is difficult to achieve when being led virtually as recognized by the respondents in this study. These findings are supported by Pitkänen (2021) who found that e-leadership can negatively affect employees' level of work motivation. Specifically, this study found that due to the difficulties for e-leaders to project charisma virtually, many employees asserted that the digital domain had demotivating features and that e-leadership was less impactful than traditional (i.e., in-person) leadership. Existing literature on leadership has consistently demonstrated the correlation between charismatic leaders and individual and organisational performance (Jung & Avolio, 2000 as cited in Neufeld et al., 2007). Thus, charismatic leaders motivate their followers, and encourage them to adopt greater goal-oriented behaviours (Eden, 1992; House & Shamir, 1993 as cited in Neufeld et al., 2007). Leaders that are charismatic typically convey messages of motivation to their followers (Neufeld et al., 2007). Thus, it becomes vital for e-leaders to project charisma when leading virtually.

### *5.1.3. The Need to Humanise the Remote Work Experience*

Many respondents expressed that the removal of various components that constitute human presence due to the nature of remote work had dehumanised the experience of working virtually, reflecting similar insights provided by Khan (2016). The findings from this research study illustrate the significance for e-leaders to refine the practice of remote work in a manner that embraces greater human elements that are typically lost when working online. E-leaders must transmit and foster their social presence when leading virtually as a means of humanising the remote work experience. Existing literature and research on e-leaders suggest that leaders must be actively present and accessible online despite being physically absent (Panteli, 2016). Yoo and Alavi (2004) and Preece and Shneiderman (2009), for instance, defined leaders in the digital space as someone who gradually emerges through their contributions and expertise (Panteli, 2016). Thereby, one of the key drivers of e-leadership is presence and interaction (Zigurs, 2002). A plausible account for the dehumanising quality generally associated with remote work may be a result of the various markers, such as voice inflection, body language, facial expressions, and in-person communication, that are lost in digitally mediated settings (Darics, 2020), which were reflected in this study's findings. The full communication process and one's social surroundings are significantly influenced by non-verbal communication (Phutela, 2015). As a result, in order for e-leaders to be deemed effective and counteract these lost markers, they must impart presence in the online sphere (Walvoord et al., 2008).

The need for e-leaders to impart greater presence when leading virtually is supported by Social Presence Theory (SPT). This theory measures how much an individual is deemed to be a "real person" in the digitally mediated space (Bickle et al., 2019). In other words, the SPT is based on the notion that technology has the capability to transmit socio-emotional information and has the capacity to accentuate the "presence" of the other person (Walvoord et al., 2008). According to Men et al. (2018), existing literature has demonstrated its benefits, including boosting customer satisfaction with e-commerce platforms (Hassanein & Head, 2007), improving customer loyalty in e-service (Cyr et al., 2007), as well as fostering social interactions and student participation within online learning (Kreijns et al., 2011). In particular, the capacity of communicators to present themselves emotionally and socially as "real" individuals, showcasing their personality within mediated virtual communication has shifted from the ideology of social presence to a feature of communication media (Garrison et al., 2000; Short et al., 1976; Men et al., 2018). This has been supported by the findings of the study, as respondents emphasised the significance of e-leaders' capacity to project presence when exercising leadership in the virtual sphere.

The data analysis demonstrates that a significant feature of the respondents' experiences was that e-leaders can establish a presence by the use of technology, such as emojis. This is substantiated by Walvoord et al. (2008), who claims that technology can help an e-leader convey presence. Moreover, previous research has illustrated that e-leaders who are proficient at projecting their presence and conveying their intentions clearly can keep their followers interested (Walvoord et al., 2008; Avolio & Kahai, 2003). The findings suggest that in order for e-leaders' to construct a social presence online, they must be accessible and available to their virtual team members, and they reveal that this was considered a priority for e-leaders. This is concurrent with Green's (2020) findings, in that e-leaders must be accessible to recognise the work put forward in planning activities and to offer suggestions in the completion of tasks. Furthermore, the author suggests that it may be necessary for e-leaders to provide further explanations and clarifications of given assignments for virtual teams, thus, illustrating a sense of accessibility as a means of humanising the remote work experience.

The requirement for the e-leaders to ensure that the team goes beyond simply concentrating on the task itself to personalising virtual work relationships was another key finding. Respondents articulated that their relationship with their e-leader was affected due to the nature of remote work, either positively or negatively. Respondents recognized that it is easy to get overly task-

focused, which causes remote work to become impersonal and lack a human essence. This supports earlier research that discovered that virtual teams are more inclined to overlook the need to foster social relations (Kimball & Eunice, 1999 as cited in Hambley et al., 2007). As such, personalising interactions between e-leaders and virtual team members remains imperative. Additionally, the physical distance apparent in remote work can reduce the depth of communication, resulting in a more formalised communication structure (Murashkin & Tyrväinen, 2020), leading e-leaders to be perceived as more clinical and formal. These results are consistent with previous research that illustrate how significant informal social interactions are when working remotely. For instance, Röcker (2012) argues that traditional leaders engage with a variety of people throughout the day in primarily causal settings, and that computer-mediated communication is typically considered less personal and friendly, and as a result, is regarded as more task-oriented than in-person communication.

#### *5.1.4. Resources:*

What become apparent for some respondents were the lack of resources made available to them, specifically emotional support from e-leaders, despite the increase of demands when working virtually. When job resources are absent, previous studies have demonstrated that excessive job demands are related to lower levels of well-being and a greater risk of burnout (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004; Schaufeli, 2015). The term "job demands" refers to those psychological, social, physical, or organisational components of the job that necessitate persistent psychological and/or physical (emotional and cognitive) exertion and are consequently associated with particular psychological and/or physiological costs (Bakker and Demerouti 2007). Although they are not always pernicious, they may generate stress if they consume much effort, particularly if not accompanied by sufficient resources (Meijman & Mulder, 1998 as cited in Dolce et al., 2020). Thus, it becomes imperative for e-leaders to provide the adequate resources to their virtual teams. The findings of Panteli et al. (2019) illustrated that e-leaders can enhance employees' work engagement through efficient utilisation of resources. This, thereby, represents the Job-Demands Resource (JD-R) model. The JD-R Theory was initially developed to describe how particular working conditions may affect burnout (Bakker and Demerouti 2007; Bakker and Demerouti 2017). Not only is it vital for e-leaders to provide the necessary support and resources to ensure that their virtual teams can cope with the demands of working virtually, but Kroth (2007) asserts that motivation will prevail, which was another concern commonly experienced amongst respondents for this study. As a result, a supportive e-leader with proficient competencies and behavioural tactics,

according to Oleksa-Marewska and Tokar (2022), is a valuable resource for managing work demands unique to the digital realm.

Employees who are experiencing isolation when working remotely require emotional and social support (Gewurtz et al., 2022 as cited in Oleksa-Marewska & Tokar, 2022). Although co-workers may be able to assist, in the context of virtual work, e-leaders are a valuable source of emotional support due to physical separation (Oleksa-Marewska & Tokar, 2022). Contreras et al. (2020) and Kniffin et al. (2021) further asserts that e-leaders must attend to the social and emotional needs of remote workers to overcome possible social isolation, foster healthy virtual teams as well as to sustain social connections amongst virtual teams. However, the current study noted that many respondents experienced inadequate emotional support from their e-leaders. Gibson and Gibbs (2006) found that by regularly checking in with team members, demonstrating empathy, as well as promoting a supportive work environment, e-leaders can offer emotional support to their virtual teams. Thus, e-leaders who fail to provide emotional support to their virtual teams run the risk of adversely impacting their employee's ability to cope with the increasing demands faced when working remotely.

Despite the lack of emotional support provided by e-leaders as highlighted by some respondents, other forms of support and resources were distributed amongst virtual teams including informational, such as webinars and tangible resources, such as home office equipment.

Researchers have recently noted that modern work arrangements constitute substantial, often invisible and unrecognized, volume of work (Chamakiotis et al., 2021). This work is referred to as "digi-i-housekeeping" (Whiting & Symon, 2020 as cited in Chamakiotis et al., 2021), and it encompasses an array of "invisible" tasks, such as arranging one's inbox and deleting junk emails, which, in turn, may add to employees work demands (Chamakiotis et al., 2021). Moreover, Cañibano et al. (2020) proposed that when operating in the context of COVID-19, role conflict, caused by, for instance, working from home, and the formation of new roles, such as the role of a teacher to home-school children, elevated demands for virtual teams. Within the context of COVID-19, these heightened demands were possibly accompanied by reduced resources, such as less informal exchanges with co-workers who may have acted as a source of support (Cañibano et al., 2020). This serves to further reinforce the responsibility that e-leaders have in ensuring that their virtual teams have the necessary resources required to cope with the increased demands typically found when working in the digital space. As a result, the

JD-R model was supported by this study, demonstrating that e-leadership may serve as a resource itself by addressing job demands brought on by the digitalisation of work (Zeike et al., 2019).

### *5.1.5. Greater Connectedness*

The recognition and response to the limited social interactions experienced when working remotely emerged as a prominent sub-theme from the data. Compared to traditional in-person teams, virtual teams are typically more task-oriented and less socially-oriented due to the nature of remote work (Powell et al., 2004). Furthermore, previous studies have demonstrated that virtual teams typically report having weaker connections with team members than do traditional team members as a result of the physical distance between teams, which has been shown to lessen personal contact (Cortellazzo et al., 2019; McDonough et al., 2001 as cited in Powell et al., 2004). Limited opportunities for impromptu gatherings can lessen the drive to form trust and social relations. The feeling of belonging to a team may be sacrificed when members cannot see one another, and team cohesion is inadvertently reduced as a result (Greenberg et al. 2007). Thereby, the lack of opportunities for social engagements may contribute to social isolation, which refers to the insufficient support available from organisational members and scarce possibilities for emotional and social connections (Marshall et al., 2007), and professional isolation, which concerns the diminished prospect of receiving compensations or promotions (De Vries et al., 2019). The presence of social isolation amongst virtual teams may eventually give rise to a decline in motivation, work performance, job satisfaction, well-being as well as generate greater emotional exhaustion (Contreras et al., 2020; Sahai et al., 2020; Cortellazzo et al., 2019).

Subsequently, several respondents expressed that an e-leader must create and preserve personal bonds and connections to compensate for their physical absence, which aligned with Murashkin and Tyrväinen's (2020) findings. Thereby, through the data analysis it became evident that e-leaders must devote their attention to cultivating the time and space for social interactions that are not aligned with work to occur to enable connections amongst virtual teams. This has been previously highlighted by various studies, including Murashkin and Tyrväinen (2020), Kniffin et al. (2021), as well as Wojcak et al. (2016). Additionally, respondents articulated the need for e-leaders to exert greater effort in maintaining and fostering relations amongst virtual teams. Team's development and their well-being are attributed to being influenced by strong relationships, therefore having positive interactions

with the team and its members are crucial (Thomas et al., 2013). Fernandez and Jawadi (2015) further elaborate by arguing that strong collaborative relationships can promote team productivity and encourage members to be more creative and innovative. Consequently, it's pivotal for e-leaders to invest in establishing personal connections with their virtual team members (Schwarzmüller et al., 2018).

The findings of this study provided useful insight with regards to the implications of virtual social interactions between e-leaders and virtual teams. Specifically, several respondents recognised a shift in social interactions that take place online, identifying these interactions as more awkward. Hertel et al. (2005) revealed the possibility of greater awkward online social interactions. This can possibly be ascribed to several facets, for instance, the social norms in digital settings and the absence of non-verbal indicators (Powell et al., 2004). In-person communication heavily depends on facial expressions, voice inflections, and body language to create rapport and transmit meaning (Darics, 2020). Yet, in virtual settings, these indicators may become omitted, rendering greater misunderstandings, awkward encounters, and misinterpretations (Byron & Baldridge, 2005; Darics, 2020). Moreover, awkward social encounters may also be attributed to the paucity of social standards when operating virtually. Hertel et al. (2005) and Garro-Abarca et al. (2021), revealed that virtual teams experience greater interpersonal conflicts and communication breakdowns than teams working in-person due, partly, to the removed social norms and nonverbal cues. In order to alleviate these difficulties, e-leaders must construct explicit standards of communication, and be cognisant of the various constraints derived from virtual communication (Bergiel et al., 2008; Jawadi et al., 2013; Trivedi & Desai, 2012).

### *5.1.6. Effortful Leadership*

The data gathered from the interviews stressed several key findings that signify the need for e-leaders to, overall, exert greater effort, with specific reference to establishing and maintaining connection, communication, exposure to knowledge share, trust, engagement and motivation, as well as humanizing the remote work experience (Hertel et al., 2005; Savolainen, 2014; Liu et al., 2018; Van Wart et al., 2017; DasGupta, 2011; Hart & Mcleod, 2003; Kayworth & Leidner 2001). Thereby, merely translating traditional leadership practices into the virtual realm as an e-leader would not suffice, as greater effort is required in order to effectively lead. All effort required to be exerted in the areas highlighted above are aligned with the literature. For instance, Avolio and Kahai (2013) and Song and Ford (2022) both argue that rather than

viewing e-leadership as simply an extension of traditional leadership, it should be regarded as a fundamental shift in how followers and leaders interact and how technology can be incorporated within leadership, rendering greater effort from e-leaders.

The findings further highlighted that in order for e-leaders to be deemed effective and overcome the challenges unique to remote work, e-leaders are required to modify their leadership style. This is supported by DasGupta (2011) who asserted that e-leaders must acquire the necessary skills to overcome these obstacles and optimally lead virtual teams since simply adopting current leadership paradigms into context of e-leadership will be insufficient.

#### *5.1.7. Trust (Control vs Freedom)*

Despite the variety of experiences shared by respondents, this study found that a common theme, trust, emerged from the data. The findings for this study indicated that the respondents stressed the importance of trust when being led by an e-leader. This is in line with previous research. For instance, within their meta-analysis, Allen and Vakalahi (2013) discovered that trust was a significant concern for e-leaders of virtual teams, demonstrating the need for e-leaders to establish trust amongst virtual teams. Yet, being led by, and leading as an e-leader to dispersed teams has implications for trust building in the digital sphere (Greenberg et al., 2007), making it more difficult to do so. According to Hambley et al. (2007), this is because there is less room for spontaneous meetings or causal interactions. Thus, the physical separation between employees and leaders makes it challenging for trust generation to occur (Louie, 2017). Moreover, technology-based communication is deemed more impersonal and is typically anchored within tasks rather than fostering relationships, which undermines the formation of trust (Mendez et al., 2015).

### 5.2. Research Question 2: What are leaders lived experiences leading as an e-leader within current working conditions (i.e., operating within a hybrid-working approach or full-time remote work)?

#### *5.2.1. Knowledge Share:*

The challenge of generating and experiencing learning opportunities and knowledge sharing practices in the virtual world was reported by several respondents. These findings are consistent with those of Hertel et al. (2018) who reported that co-located teams experienced elevated levels of knowledge transfer than those who operated in the digital context. According to

Webster and Staples (2016), virtual teams may experience a decline in knowledge sharing as a result of less team engagement. This may be a result of the nature of remote work, which may impede channels of communication, making it more difficult to obtain information through informal means. In order for virtual teams to be productive, e-leaders must recognize the need for shared knowledge (Horwitz et al., 2006). Thus, it becomes essential for e-leaders to ensure and facilitate adequate exposure to the practice of knowledge sharing for/to their virtual teams. This notion is further supported by Hajro and Pudelko (2010) who conducted a study that comprised of interviewing seventy international team leaders and discovered that the most effective teams featured a leader who could encourage knowledge exchange and transfer within the group. Although difficult to attain, Korzynski's (2015) asserts that e-leaders can overcome this issue by implementing an open organisational culture in order to promote knowledge sharing, preserve dialogues, convey perspectives, and gathers information (Korzynski, 2015).

Despite the recognized difficulty in providing adequate knowledge share exposure to virtual teams, many respondents noted that their virtual teams may experience greater exposure to different forms of skills and development opportunities due to the nature of remote work, such as sound problem-solving skills, enhanced independence and autonomy, as well as greater management skills. This is in line with a study conducted by Henke et al. (2022) who found that virtual team members acquired various behaviours and skills for the purpose of meeting new environmental demands.

### *5.2.2. Instilling Motivation as an E-leader*

Although difficult to achieve, many respondents within this study highlighted the importance of maintaining a sense of stimulation and motivation amongst their virtual teams. These findings are supported by Basu (2022) as well as Pitkänen (2021) who both found that e-leadership has a direct positive effect on work motivation. Thus, many respondents introduced a variety of practices to ensure that motivation can be maintained despite working online for their virtual teams, such as replicating the office environment, making use of social newsletters, as well as employing technological features available to them. Some of these practices are aligned with Aharouay's (2021) study, in that e-leaders must promote the exchange of social information that enables members to get to know one another and create collaborative connections to ensure levels of motivation are preserved. This is a result of e-leaders recognising the potential isolation that virtual team members may encounter due to physical separation and a lack of in-person interaction (Jawadi et al., 2008).

### *5.2.3. The Need to Humanise the Remote Work Experience*

One of the respondents, Ben, articulated the significance of refining remote work practices to include more human elements that are typically lost online. Ben was able to highlight the human essence within his virtual teams through the exercise of storytelling. According to Menabney (2020), storytelling is a powerful tool to convey effective communication. Additionally, Sturt and Nordstorm (2015) assert that leaders can influence a variety of aspects pertaining to inclusivity, engagement, and general well-being when implementing the practice of storytelling. Furthermore, the practice of storytelling can cultivate a sense of psychological safety and trust amongst virtual teams (Menabney, 2020), further reinforcing the notion of humanising remote work.

As previously mentioned, this study has noted the need for e-leaders to impart greater presence when leading virtually as an e-leader. This is in line with current literature and research on e-leadership, which argues that despite the physical proximity between team members that accompanies this leadership domain, e-leaders must proactively establish an online presence. The nature of remote work causes the various markers, such as voice inflection, body language, and facial expressions, that constitute non-verbal communication to be compromised. In a recent study, Darics (2020) concluded that the use of non-verbal signals in digital communication serves subtle, but significant purposes, and further contended for a change in perception of developing writing strategies within virtual communication. This was supported by the study's findings as Craig, one of the respondents, recognised the significance of establishing an online presence as an e-leader, and as such, employed creative communication tactics to establish a sense of presence online.

In order to facilitate distributed team communication, e-leaders must leverage the advanced information technology (AIT) available to them in order to humanise the remote working experience. For instance, True (2019) and Lau et al. (2000) assert that the use of video conferencing over impersonal communication formats, such as email, is preferable.

### *5.2.4. Ease of Accessibility and Boundaries*

It was evident from the data analysis that the respondents had similar experiences concerning accessibility of e-leaders. Specifically, respondents recognized that in-person teams have greater accessibility than virtual teams. Virtual teams may encounter difficulties reaching their e-leaders since they cannot simply approach them in-person. As a result, respondents

recognised the pertinence of being accessible and available to their virtual teams. This supports previous research (e.g., Hargreaves & Lester, 2022). In light of the preceding assertions, e-leaders must proactively make themselves accessible to their teams.

Respondents noted that access was easier when working in-person as they were able to merely "pop over" to one's desk for social engagement or to seek information prior to working remotely. Previous research conducted has investigated the effect of physical proximity on collaboration and communication in conventional office settings, such as Kraut et al. (1990). Communication conducted in-person can promote social bonds, trust-building, and information exchange (Kraut et al., 1990). Thus, e-leaders must explore alternative means of maintaining these interactions as well as ensuring that they are perceived as being available and accessible to their virtual teams when working remotely.

Nevertheless, for some respondents, the removal of merely "popping over" to one's desk has had some positive implications. For instance, some respondents discovered that working remotely assisted them to focus on their work without being distracted or interrupted, generating greater productivity. This finding aligns with previous studies that focused on the impact of remote work concerning interruptions and productivity. For instance, Martin et al. (2022) found that working from home provides greater autonomy, improved focus, and fewer interruptions, which results in greater work satisfaction and productivity.

Since technology is widely available, e-leaders can now be accessed at any time, from any location and through a variety of devices (Cascio & Shurygalio, 2003). As such, e-leaders may find it difficult to manage and balance their professional and personal life (Rybnikova et al., 2022). In a study conducted by Rybnikova et al. (2022), the use of a range of communication channels, providing continuous accessibility potentially obscuring the lines between work and personal life raised stress levels for both leaders and workers, which significantly affected levels of motivation. This is also supported by Avolio et al. (2014) who recognised "constant contact" (Avolio et al., 2014, p. 119) as a common challenge that e-leaders may face. Due to this, e-leaders may need to be aware of how their leadership style affects their own well-being and that of their virtual team members. They may need to take precautions to ensure that their personal and professional lives are kept separate in order to prevent burnout and other detrimental effects.

### *5.2.5. The Development of E-leadership Skills*

The results of this study indicate that for e-leaders to lead effectively, they are required to adopt new skill sets as leading virtually differs to leading face-to-face. The need for e-leaders to acquire new skills to effectively lead virtually is supported by previous research. For instance, DasGupta (2011), who contends that merely adapting current leadership approaches to e-leadership settings will be inadequate sincethe various competencies that are required to successfully lead as an e-leader differs to conventional (i.e., in-person) leadership. Operating within the digital context effects e-leaders' behaviours and skills needed to be leveraged in order to be deemed effective. For instance, the virtual workplace places greater value on certain skills, such as communicating with technology (Varty et al., 2017), and necessitating alternative managerial and leadership strategies (Charlier et al., 2016 as cited in Henke et al., 2022).

This chapter has discussed the findings of this research in relation to previous research in this area. The following final chapter will discuss the central findings, the study's limitations, and offer several suggested areas for further research. Hereinafter, the theoretical and practical contributions from this study will then be addressed.

# Chapter 6: Conclusion and Recommendations

## 6.1. Central Findings

The emergence of virtual teams and e-leaders has been accelerated by growing globalisation and technological advancements. E-leadership and virtual teams have become popularised as organisations continue to expand into international operations and execute tasks through the advancement of technology (Mukherjee et al., 2012). Due to the collection of difficulties that come with interacting in a digitally mediated and distributed team setting, leadership has been recognised as fundamental for virtual team success (Kirkman et al., 2012). Although interest in exploring the relationship between leadership and digital technology has evolved, research on e-leadership is scarce as it continues to be at "very nascent stages of development" (Avolio et al., 2014, p. 105), and thus, many scholars have argued for further exploration for this field of research, such as Van Wart et al. (2019) and Kashive et al. (2022). The intent of this qualitative phenomenological study was to gain a deeper understanding of e-leadership by exploring the lived experiences of employees and leaders. The study's findings provide new and pertinent research to the existing body of knowledge pertaining to e-leadership as well as support and corroborate previous findings in the literature.

This study identified a combination of twelve themes that are critical to understand how to successfully conduct e-leadership in the digital era. Overall, distributed team members (i.e., employees) responded positively towards e-leadership. This is in spite of some the difficulties experienced by employees, such as feeling a lack of motivation, the absence of human qualities when working remotely, limited resources provided, and the diminished connections due to the removal of social interactions. Thus, it is imperative for e-leaders to be cognisant of and recognise the unique challenges virtual teams may encounter that are not present in a collocated setting (Abbasnejad & Moud, 2012). What became evident for employees from the dataset is that e-leaders are required to exert greater effort in all areas of identified challenges, such as instilling motivation for employees, cultivating an online presence, fostering and strengthening connections, the means of communicating virtually, provide greater resources, refining healthy workplace boundaries, trust generation, ensuring greater accessibility and availability for their virtual teams, and ensuring adequate exposure to knowledge share (Schwarzmüller et al., 2018; Hertel et al., 2005; Savolainen, 2014; Liu et al., 2018; Van Wart et al., 2017; DasGupta, 2011; Hart & Mcleod, 2003; Kayworth & Leidner 2001).

It became clear from the analysis of the leaders' dataset that successful e-leadership is far more difficult to deploy. In other words, leaders highlighted the various unique challenges that take place when leading virtually, further supporting previous literature in that one cannot merely adapt current leadership approaches to e-leadership settings (DasGupta, 2011). Rather, greater effort and thought is required for leaders to effectively lead online as e-leaders. People have become more distant as a result of substituting technology for in-person interactions, thus, diminishing connection (Cortellazzo et al., 2019; McDonough et al., 2001 as cited in Powell et al., 2004). As such, in line with the employees dataset, e-leaders must re-establish the human components back into their interpersonal relationships as a means of ensuring greater connectedness, and instilling motivation amongst their virtual teams (Panteli, 2016; Zigurs, 2002; Walvoord et al., 2008). In addition to being cognisant of the particular difficulties that virtual teams may encounter, such as the limited exposure to knowledge share and learning opportunities, diminished motivation, and reduced connectivity, leaders are required to navigate the unique challenges that they face as an e-leader, such as blurred boundaries and greater accessibility.

These findings address the research questions and further produce leadership implications and recommendations through the evidence that emerged during the data analysis.

### 6.2. Limitations of the current study and Future Recommendations:

The first limitation for this study is that many of the participants interviewed worked within the same organisation, with some detailing similar positions held. This may have formed a certain bias, given that the leadership styles may be similar as a consequence of the organisational culture acting as an influence. As such, this could restrict the range of viewpoints and experiences that the study was able to acquire. Future research may consider the incorporation of respondents from a variety of organisations as a means to address this limitation and obtain a more comprehensive understanding of experiences pertaining to e-leadership.

This qualitative study did not incorporate an immediate link between subordinates and their leaders, which may serve as a possible limitation. Although this research study sought to document both employees' and leaders' experiences of e-leadership, the absence of a direct pairing between both sets of respondents may have limited the depth of the insights acquired. It is plausible that the viewpoints of the employees were influenced by variables other than

their particular encounters with their leader in the absence of an immediate pairing between employees and leaders. For instance, the organisation's culture may have had an impact on an employees' impressions about their leader's e-leadership style. This limitation, thus, presents an opportunity for future research to feature a more immediate match between employees and leaders to acquire a more refined understanding of the experiences of both groups.

Moreover, this study may have certain limitations due to the exploratory approach it assumed to explore both leaders' and employees' experiences of e-leadership, as opposed to a quantitative research approach that would enable the formulation and construction of models. While qualitative research can offer detailed and nuanced insights into unique experiences, it may not be as valuable for identifying more generalised patterns and interactions across variables. Therefore, an avenue for future research is to potentially employ a quantitative research design in relation to e-leadership. Byrman (2018) argues that one of the primary criticisms of qualitative methods is that they are based on small sample sizes, making it difficult to recreate and replicate the results in further studies. The findings from qualitative research can, however, be used to develop theories about numerous phenomena (Bryman, 2018). Thus, this research focused on experiences about how employees' and leaders experience e-leadership, rather than seeking to produce generalised findings about a given population.

The timing of this study may have impacted the respondents' perceptions and experiences regarding e-leadership, which may serve as a potential limitation. The study was carried out shortly following the COVID-19 pandemic, which might have had an effect on the environment in the workplace and the experiences of e-leadership. It is possible that many organisations were, perhaps, in a state of flux and instability during this period as they may have been attempting to adjust to a new reality or generate a new equilibrium following the severe disturbances and changes caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, these broader contextual elements may have altered the experiences and viewpoints of employees and leaders regarding e-leadership. Additionally, the particular difficulties and pressures that respondents may have encountered at this time in the post-COVID-19 context, such as remote work, and increased workload, may have influenced their experiences and perceptions regarding e-leadership. Consequently, while this study may offer insightful information about the e-leadership experiences within the post-COVID-19 setting, this critical period may have also restricted the generalisability of the conclusions and overlook the subtleties of the experiences that may have been influenced by wider contextual elements.

It has previously been recommended that a sample size of twelve should be used (Fugard & Potts, 2015; Guest et al., 2006). Thus, the researcher was successful in obtaining fourteen in-depth interviews with both employees and leaders with experiences pertaining to e-leadership. Yet, it would have been optimal for this study to acquire an equal sample size for each distinct sample group (i.e., employees and leaders) as only five leaders and nine employees participated. This study is, thus, slightly more reliant on employees' views than leaders' views for its results.

Finally, another possible limitation for this research on the experiences of e-leadership is that it was an a-theoretical study. Specifically, no guiding theoretical framework was employed for this qualitative research study. The interpretability and generalisability of the study's findings could be hindered by this lack of theoretical basis since it may be challenging to fully comprehend and contextualise the experiences of e-leadership among employees and leaders without a guiding theoretical framework. An avenue for future research could be the exploration in designing and developing a theoretical framework for the e-leadership phenomenon since a theoretical model can serve as a starting point to fully comprehend e-leadership.

### 6.3. Theoretical Contributions

Although some theoretical frameworks were utilised for this study, such as the JD-R model, and the SPT, no guiding theoretical model or framework was employed, which could serve as a potential limitation. This was due to an absence of an available theoretical model and/or framework that has been designed to sufficiently encapsulate the entirety of e-leadership. Although some previous theoretical frameworks have been previously employed in the context of studying e-leadership, such as Avolio's et al., (2001) use of Advanced Information Technology (AIT), these only address certain facets of e-leadership. Given the findings within this study, it is evident that a guiding theoretical framework for e-leadership is required. Additionally, other existing leadership theories and theoretical models that partly relate to the phenomenon in question may be adapted to account for e-leadership as part of a new guiding theoretical framework. In light of this remark, this study was able to offer sufficient guidance to aid in the development of an e-leadership theoretical framework.

Moreover, it has been acknowledged that leadership represents an important phenomenon in social contexts in general and, of course, in organisations in particular. By exploring the

phenomenon of e-leadership, this study expands our understanding of this leadership paradigm. In addition, this study was able to provide further insights into the critical competencies that are needed for effective e-leadership.

### 6.4. Practical Contributions:

The purpose of this research study was to explore and gain richer understanding pertaining to employees' and leaders experiences with e-leadership. It is through this that the researcher was able to showcase key insights upon the parameters that determine what effective e-leadership constitutes. Based on the prescriptive key findings generated from this study, it is evident that in order for e-leaders to be deemed effective in the virtual realm, greater effort is required. As such, organisations must consider investing in training programmes or other resources that firstly, target specific skill sets that necessitate successful e-leadership, and secondly to assist their e-leaders to cope with the requirement of exerting greater effort in the virtual realm. For instance, training initiatives could be offered based on how to better leverage technology to cultivate an online social presence or on efficient communication techniques for digital settings.

It is evident that there is insufficient literature present that explores the phenomenon of e-leadership. The purpose of this project was to gain a deeper understanding of this particular leadership style in the digital realm. It is through this that I have been able to illustrate a deeper understanding of e-leadership through the lens of employees' and leaders', who have had direct exposure. In turn, it has become evident that e-leadership constitutes certain difficulties that are unique when leading virtual teams that are not present in a collocated setting (Abbasnejad & Moud, 2012). As such, e-leaders must adopt the necessary skills and behaviours as well as exert greater effort in all areas to overcome these unique challenges.

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## APPENDIX A

*Participant Information Sheet (PIS)*




### Participant Information Sheet (PIS)

*Experiences of E-Leadership: A Qualitative Study*

Good Day!

I would like to invite you to take part in a research study. Before deciding, please take the time to read the following information carefully to fully understand why the research is being done and what it would involve for you.

My name is Chloe Gilchrist, and I am currently completing my master's degree in organisational/industrial psychology at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. A requirement of the degree is to conduct a research report. The central aim of my research is to understand e-leadership in accordance with leaders and employees' experiences working virtually. The study will make use of either face-to-face or online interviews, which is estimated to be approximately 45 minutes long, and will be conducted by myself. The interviews will be recorded and transcribed, but only my supervisor and myself will have access to this content. The recordings of the interview will be deleted once the final study report has been finalised and marked, and the transcripts will be stored on a password protected computer for the duration of the research.

Participation is voluntary and there are no incentives or rewards associated with participation for this study. All participants have the right to withdraw from the study at any point without penalty or consequences. The information disclosed by the participants and their identities will be kept anonymous and confidential through the use of pseudonyms. Participants will be asked to sign two consent forms prior to the interview to ensure that they have a clear understanding of what is required of them. The purpose of the first consent form is to ensure that all participants understand what is expected of them, and the second consent form verifies that the

participant understands that the interview will be recorded. Participants may request a feedback sheet of the results which were found for this study, if deemed appropriate.

If there are any queries, or if you require additional information, please do not hesitate to contact myself or my supervisor.

Thank you for taking the time to read the participant information sheet, as well as to understand your role.

Many Thanks

Kind regards,

Chloe Gilchrist

Please fill out the information below as proof that you have read and understood the participant information sheet:

Participant Name(s): _____

Date: _____

Signature: _____

**Contact Details:**

Chloe Gilchrist (researcher): chlogilchrist@icloud.com

Professor Karen Milner (supervisor): karen.milner@wits.ac.za

## APPENDIX B

*Consent form for participation in the interview*




### Consent form to participate in the interview

I _____(name/s), hereby consent to participate in the study on understanding leaders and employees' experiences regarding e-leadership, in Johannesburg, South Africa, conducted by Chloe Gilchrist.

I understand that:

- Participation in this study is entirely voluntary
- I can withdraw from the study at any given point, without facing penalties or consequences
- Participation will not result in any rewards or incentives
- There will be no identifying data as the study will make use of pseudonyms
- All information provided will remain confidential
- I am not required to answer questions that may make me feel uncomfortable
- I will have access to the final results if requested
- The findings of the study will be presented as a research report for the partial completion of an organisational/industrial psychology master's degree

Date: _____

Signature: _____

## APPENDIX C

*Consent form for the audio recording*




### Consent form for the audio recording

I, _____ (name/s), hereby give consent for Chloe Gilchrist to audio record my interview on an audio recorder.

I understand that:

- The researcher and her supervisor will be the only ones who will have access to the typed-up interview transcripts and audio recordings
- No identifying information will be accessible given the use of pseudonyms
- Once the research report is finalized and marked, the recordings will be destroyed
- The interview transcripts will be kept on a secure password protected computer for the duration of this research

Date: _____

Signature: _____

## APPENDIX D

*Overview of the Respondents:*

| Respondent | Leader or Employee | Job Title | Industry | Date | Length | Setting |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Eddie | Employee | Front Office Technical Analyst | Investment Banking | 6th October 2022 | 1 hour and 18 minutes | Virtual via Teams |
| Peter | Employee | Financial Manager | Private Equity | 6th October 2022 | 1 hour | Virtual via Teams |
| Alyssa | Leader | User Experience Designer and Business Analyst | UX Design | 9th October 2022 | 1 hour and 18 minutes | Virtual via Teams |
| Craig | Leader | Actuarial Manager | Life Insurance and Financial Services | 20th October 2022 | 1 hour and 11 minutes | Virtual via Teams |
| Amelia | Employee | Environmental Manager Intern | Non-Profit Sector (NGO) | 24th October 2022 | 52 Minutes | In-person in Johannesburg |
| Erin | Employee | Assistant Actuarial Manager | Insurance and Financial Services | 1st November 2022 | 1 hour and 8 minutes | Virtual via Teams |
| Arthur | Employee | Assistant Actuarial Manager | Life Insurance and Financial Services | 4th November 2022 | 55 Minutes | Virtual via Teams |
| Madison | Leader | Director and Lead Designer of Company | Architecture | 25th November 2022 | 36 Minutes | Virtual via Teams |

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Hannah | Employee | Research Analyst | Advertising, Marketing and Business Services | 28th November 2022 | 43 Minutes | In-person in Johannesburg |
| Noah | Employee | Production Markets and Principal Architect | Architecture | 3rd December 2022 | 58 Minutes | Virtual via Teams |
| Claire | Leader | HR Executive for Organisational Development and Change Management | Financial Services Industry | 5th December 2022 | 42 Minutes | Virtual via Teams |
| Jade | Employee | Copy Editor | Education Industry | 6th December 2022 | 1 hour and 12 minutes | Virtual via Teams |
| Ben | Leader | Chief Executive Officer | Management Consulting | 7th December 2022 | 1 hour and 5 minutes | Virtual via Teams |
| Sue | Employee | HR Systems Specialist | Human Resources | 8th December 2022 | 27 Minutes | Virtual via Teams |

## APPENDIX E

*Interview Schedule for Leaders*




### Interview Schedule for Leaders

| Interview Question | Purpose for Asking Question | Probing Questions |
|---|---|---|
| **Introduction and Demographic Section** | | |
| **1)** Thank you for agreeing to participate today. I really appreciate it. How are you feeling today? | The purpose of asking this question is to build rapport with the participants to ensure that they are feeling comfortable and at ease. | Before we start, do you have any questions you would want to ask? |
| **2)** I'm going to be asking some demographic details about yourself. Please could you provide me your:<br>a.) Age<br>b.) Gender<br>c.) Race and/or ethnicity<br>d.) Highest qualifications.<br>e.) The industry you're based in currently.<br>f.) The number of years of work experience. | The reason for this question is to obtain the demographic details of the respondents, as part of ensuring adequate variability amongst the sample group. | |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **3)** Please can you give me a bit of background regarding your professional experience? | This question will be asked in order to gain a bit of background into the participant. This also allows the participant to settle into the interview by focusing on the broader content with this question. | |
| **4)** What is your current position/title, and could you briefly describe this role? | This question is asked to gain a bit of context of the participant, and to gain further understanding of the participant's role in the organisation they're currently working at. It also serves to confirm variability amongst the sample. | |
| **5)** How long have you worked in your current position and how long have you worked at your organisation? | This question will be asked to obtain further background information on the participant. It also confirms their working position and where they are currently at in their career. | |
| **Description of Team and Role** | | |
| **6)** Please can you describe the current work arrangement for your team (i.e., hybrid-work or full-time remote working) | This question enables the researcher to know the current working conditions in which the participant operates within. | Would you mind explaining how this works? |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | | Are you happy with this work arrangement? Please explain. |
| **7)** What has been your experience, thus far, leading virtual teams? | By asking this question, it allows for the participants to explicitly state their personal experiences with leading virtual teams. | |
| **Factors of traditional practices of leadership and experiences of e-leadership during their transformation** | | |
| **8)** What is your understanding of leadership, and e-leadership? | This question is intended to gain an understanding of what leadership and e-leadership means to the participant. | |
| **9)** Based on your understanding of leadership, how do you translate the idea of traditional leadership into an e-leadership practice? | This question is intended to establish participants' personal view on what they believed they needed to do in order to translate leading conventionally to leading virtually to get the same effect/output essentially. | What specific methods have you used to help sustain your traditional leadership practices?<br><br>How did this help your transformation into an e-leadership position? |
| **10)** From your experience, how would you say leading as an e-leader in the virtual environment differs compared to leading traditionally? | This question is intended to explore participants understanding of traditional leadership and e-leadership, as well as determine if the participant experiences any | |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | differences between the two leadership paradigms. | |
| **11)** What are some qualities of e-leadership that you believe in and practice? | The purpose of this question is to determine, from the experience of the participant, what competencies are required for successful e-leadership, and how they may differ from traditional leadership. | How do they compare to traditional leadership? |
| **12)** What were your initial thoughts when you were introduced to the new practices of technology and your experience with transformation into an e-leadership role? | The purpose of this question is to establish how readily prepared participants felt with transitioning into the virtual realm and leading as an e-leader as well as determine what experience they had prior to the transition. | |
| **13)** Could you please describe the competencies that you have developed due to the increased digital operation? | The purpose of this question is to establish what, if any, competencies were developed as a result of leading as an e-leaders. This question also determines the necessary critical competencies needed for optimal e-leadership. | |
| **Communication and Relationships in Virtual Teams** | | |
| **14)** Could you please describe the way you communicated | This question aims to determine how frequently technology was used prior to | Could you elaborate on the differences in how the communication is |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| with your team before COVID-19, and now? | the COVID-19 as it may give an indication to how ready the team was to shift into the virtual sphere, and how much of a shock it was to adapt to this new working condition. | conducted now in comparison to before COVID-19, and how, if so, has the communication changed?<br><br>Do you feel that this form of communication is effective or ineffective? Please explain. |
| **15)** Can you please tell me about the social dynamics within the team. | This question is intended to establish the current social dynamics within the virtual teams with which the e-leader operates within to gain further context. | |
| **16)** Do you think that the relationship between you and your team changed due to the practice of e-leadership? | This question is intended to establish how technologically mediated environments impacts the social dynamics and relationships within working teams and seeing if e-leadership influences this. | Can you tell me why you think that this is the case? |
| **17)** What leadership practices did you initiate to safeguard your relationships with your employees and other leaders? | The purpose of this question is to establish what practices are useful in conveying the same emotional and social experience when communicating digitally within virtual teams for e-leaders. | Are you still using these practices?<br><br>Have you found them helpful? |

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| **18)** How do you provide support to your employees within virtual teams? | This question serves to determine what kind of support has been provided to virtual teams by e-leaders. | |
| **E-Leadership: Strengths and Challenges** | | |
| **19)** Could you please elaborate on situation where you feel like you are limited by digital tools? | The purpose of this question is to hear the participants' views on how technology has limited them since technology is essential to the practice of e-leadership. | Have you done anything to help overcome this/these limitations?<br><br>Do you still experience this limitation currently? |
| **20)** What are the benefits of leading virtual teams as an e-leader? | This question explicitly asks the direct benefits that e-leaders have encountered. | |
| **21)** What are the top leadership challenges that you have faced or are facing when leading teams as an e-leader, if any? | This question explicitly asks the direct challenges that e-leaders have encountered. | How did you overcome these leadership challenges? |
| **Sweeper Questions:** | | |
| **22)** To be effective in a virtual setting, what does a team leader need to do? | This sweeper question provides an opportunity for participants to detail anything that had not been addressed in the interview. Specifically, this question has been tailored in a way that allows participants expressed competencies that they believe e-leaders require as | |

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| | well as provide advice of what e-leaders should do in order to be deemed effective. | |
| **23)** Are there things she/he should not do? | This sweeper question provides an opportunity for participants to detail anything that had not been addressed in the interview. Specifically, this question has been tailored in a way to gain insight regarding the negative experiences participants have had leading as an e-leader, the lessons they have learnt as well as any specific advice for other e-leaders to prevent them from jeopardising the success of the virtual teams that they lead. | |
| **24)** What advice would you give to leaders who are about to transform into the virtual realm and lead as an e-leader? | This sweeper question provides an opportunity for participants to detail anything that had not been addressed in the interview. Specifically, this question is tailored in such a way that focuses on the advice (positive and/or negative) shared by participants to potential other e-leaders based on their | |

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| | experiences leading as an e-leader. | |

## APPENDIX F

*Interview Schedule for Employees*




### Interview Schedule for Employees

| Interview Question | Purpose for Asking Question | Probing Questions |
|---|---|---|
| **Introduction** | | |
| **1)** Thank you for agreeing to participate today. I really appreciate it. How are you feeling today? | The purpose of asking this question is to build rapport with the participants to ensure that they are feeling comfortable and at ease. | Before we start, do you have any questions you would want to ask? |
| **2)** I'm going to be asking some demographic details about yourself. Please could you provide me your:<br>a.) Age<br>b.) Gender<br>c.) Race and/or ethnicity<br>d.) Highest qualifications<br>e.) The industry you're based in currently.<br>f.) The number of years of work experience. | The reason for this question is to obtain the demographic details of the respondents, as part of ensuring adequate variability amongst the sample group. | |

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| **3)** Please can you give me a bit of background regarding your professional experience? | This question will be asked in order to gain a bit of background into the participant. This also allows the participant to settle into the interview by focusing on the broader content with this question. | |
| **4)** What is your current position/title, and could you briefly describe this role? | This question is asked to gain a bit of context of the participant, and to gain further understanding of the participant's role in the organisation they're currently working at. It also serves to confirm variability amongst the sample. | |
| **5)** How long have you worked in your current position and how long have you worked at your organisation? | This question will be asked to obtain further background information on the participant. It also confirms their working position and where they are currently at in their career. | |
| **Description of Team and Role** | | |
| **6)** Please can you describe the current work arrangement for your team (i.e., hybrid-work approach or full-time remote work) | This question enables the researcher to know the current working conditions in which the participant operates within. | Would you mind explaining how this works?<br><br>Are you happy with this work arrangement? Please explain. |

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| **7)** What has been your experience thus far in being led within virtual teams? | By asking this question, it allows for the participants to explicitly state their personal experiences being led by an e-leader within virtual teams. | |
| **Factors of traditional practices of leadership and experiences of e-leadership during their transformation** | | |
| **8)** What is your understanding of leadership, and e-leadership? | This question is intended to gain an understanding of what leadership and e-leadership means to the participant. | |
| **9)** Based on your understanding of leadership, how do you translate the idea of traditional leadership into an e-leadership practice? | This question is intended to establish participants' personal view on what they believe a leader needs to do in order to translate leading conventionally to leading virtually to get the same effect/output essentially. | What specific methods, that you have noticed, has your leader used to help sustain traditional leadership practices? |
| **10)** How has your experience of your leader changed from before when working in-person to working remotely or in a hybrid-work situation. | This question intends to address how participants view their leader in the virtual realm compared to how they view their leader previously when being lead traditionally (i.e., in-person) | From your experience, how would you say being led by an e-leader in the virtual environment differs compared to being led traditionally? |
| **11)** What are some qualities of e-leadership that you believe in, and feel should be practiced? | The purpose of this question is to determine what competencies are needed for successful e-leadership | How do they compare to traditional leadership? |

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| **12)** What were your initial thoughts when you were introduced to the new practices of technology? | The purpose of this question is to establish how readily prepared participants felt with transitioning into the virtual realm as well as determine what experience they had prior to the transition. | How did your leader assist the transition to a virtual team? |
| **Communication and Relationships in Virtual Teams** | | |
| **13)** Could you please describe the way you communicated with your team before COVID-19, and now? | This question aims to determine the way in which communication operates within virtual team and comparing them to face-to-face communication. | Could you elaborate on the differences in how the communication is conducted now in comparison to before COVID-19, and how, if so, how the communication has changed?<br><br>Do you feel that this form of communication is effective or ineffective? Please explain? |
| **14)** Can you please tell me about the social dynamics within the team. | This question is intended to establish the current social dynamics within the virtual teams with which the e-leader operates within to gain further context. | |
| **15)** Do you think that the relationship between | This question is intended to establish how technologically | Can you tell me why this is the case. |

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| you and your team has changed due to your current work situation? | mediated environments impacts the social dynamics and relationships within working teams and seeing if e-leadership influences this. | |
| **16)** How has your relationship changed with your leader? | The purpose of the question is to establish whether or not the act of e-leadership has impacted virtual team members' relationship with their leaders. | |
| **17)** What, if any, leadership practices did you notice that your leader initiated which helped in safeguarding your relationship with your leader and work colleagues? | The purpose of this question is to establish what practices are useful in conveying the same emotional and social experience when communicating digitally within virtual teams for e-leaders. | |
| **18)** How does your leader provide support to you and your colleagues within virtual teams?<br>a) Is there anything more that they could do? | | Are they able to create a supportive environment? |
| **E-Leadership: Strengths and Challenges** | | |
| **19)** Could you please elaborate on situation where you felt like you | The purpose of this question is to hear the participants' views on how technology has limited them since technology is | |

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| are limited by digital tools? | essential to the practice of e-leadership. | |
| **20)** What are the benefits of being led by an e-leader in virtual teams? | This question explicitly asks the direct benefits that virtual team members have encountered with regards to e-leadership. | |
| **21)** What do you think are the challenges being led remotely? | This question explicitly asks the direct challenges that virtual team members have encountered with regards to e-leadership. | What can e-leaders do to overcome these challenges? |
| **Sweeper Questions** | | |
| **22)** To be effective in a virtual setting, what does a team leader need to do? | This sweeper question provides an opportunity for participants to detail anything that had not been addressed in the interview. Specifically, this question has been tailored in a way that allows participants expressed competencies that they believe e-leaders require as well as provide advice of what e-leaders should do in order to be deemed effective. | |
| **23)** Are there things she/he should not do? | This sweeper question provides an opportunity for participants to detail anything that had not been addressed in the interview. Specifically, this question has been tailored in a way to gain insight regarding the negative | |

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| | experiences' participants have had leading as an e-leader, the lessons they have learnt as well as any specific advice for other e-leaders to prevent them from jeopardising the success of the virtual teams that they lead. | |
| **24)** What advice would you give to leaders who are about to transform into the virtual realm and lead as an e-leader? | This sweeper question provides an opportunity for participants to detail anything that had not been addressed in the interview. Specifically, this question is tailored in such a way that focuses on the advice (positive and/or negative) shared by participants to potential other e-leaders based on their experiences leading as an e-leader. | |