Remote work in the Finnish Defence Forces: Employees' experiences of changes in organisational culture

Tiina Kähkönen

tiina.kahkonen@mil.fi

https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3879-4566

Department of Leadership and Military Pedagogy, National Defence University, Kadettikouluntie 7, 00860, Helsinki, Finland

Abstract

This paper investigated what changes took place in the organisational culture of the Finnish Defence Forces during the COVID-19 pandemic, and also afterwards when remote work has remained permanently available to staff. A total of 468 employees of the Finnish Defence Forces participated in the study by reporting their experiences of changes in organisational culture. In the analysis of qualitative data, the Gioia methodology, which classifies the data into categories and themes, was used. Remote work creates challenges for leadership, and more equality, changed management competence, and remote work management skills were expected from management. However, it would seem that the organisational culture in the Finnish Defence Forces has developed in such a way that trust within the organisation is even stronger than before. Remote work has developed the personnel's skills in managing digital tools as well as the employer image of the Finnish Defence Forces in the eyes of their personnel. This is the first study to map employees' experiences of remote work from the perspective of changes in organisational culture in the Finnish Defence Forces. The research provides novel information that can be utilised in developing the operations and management of organisations. The Finnish Defence Forces have taken significant steps towards a modern work community. There are still some challenges to be solved in terms of how to improve leadership of remote work. A particularly important resource in resilience to change is the trust that is manifested in the organisational culture of the Finnish Defence Forces.

Keywords

organisational culture, changes, COVID-19, remote work, Defence Forces

Introduction

Remote work during and after the COVID-19 pandemic has led to the increase and establishment of various forms of flexible working. It has thus become topical to examine the remote work experiences of staff and the effects of remote work on changes in organisational culture. Remote work can be defined as "a flexible work arrangement whereby workers work in locations, remote from their central offices or production facilities, the worker has no personal contact with co-workers there, but is able to communicate with them using technology"(Di Martino and Wirth, 1990, p. 530). During the study carried out in the context of the Finnish Defence Forces which developed propositions for the personnel's remote work conditions measurement scale (Kähkönen, 2023) there emerged a need to investigate in more depth the personnel's views on how remote work may have affected the Defence Forces' organisational culture and personnel's attitudes in the work community through qualitative research.

Organisational culture can be thought of as a social force. It has an impact on employees at the levels of norms, emotions, and social values. Organisational culture is the core of working life, guiding the actions of employees and also what we consider important, even though these issues may not always be acknowledged. Organisational culture involves more than the organisational atmosphere, rules, and way of leading (Cunliffe, 2008). Organisational culture is a kind of deep mental structure that guides employees, according to which the organisation thinks and acts. Things that are widely adopted are usually automatically made natural and accepted in people's minds. However, in the current work environment, which is characterised by many unpredictable changes, the usual ways of working and thinking in an organization can easily be disrupted (Kähkönen et al., 2021). Organisational change means renewing workplace practices and can therefore have an impact on how organisational culture is perceived. Changes in ways of working, such as the increasing prevalence and expansion of remote work, can be seen as organisational change. At the most general level, "change is a phenomenon of time. It is the way people talk about the event in which something appears to become, or turn into, something else, where the 'something else' is seen as a result or outcome" (Ford and Ford, 1994, p. 759).

Previously, organisational culture has been studied from the perspective of its ethics (Treviño and Weaver, 2003), where it was found that employee's behaviour and well-being are influenced by assumptions, pressures, and unwritten rules permeated by the organisational culture. Kinnunen et al. (2005) have found in their research that organisational culture has a significant impact on the prevalence of certain phenomena in organisations. These include employee's stress symptoms and burnout, which can be caused by organisational pressures. Previously, organisational change has been studied from the perspective of whether organisational culture can be changed intentionally. Wolf et al. (2022) have pointed out in their research that intentional change in organisational culture is slow. This is due to the fact that organisational culture is formed over a long period of time and as a result of the things that have happened in history. Alvesson and Sveningsson (2016) bring forward the view that organisational change cannot be controlled because it is affected by so many things that occur in the organisation and complex social relationships. Kähkönen (2023) found that remote work positively affects organisations' trust outcomes and is also related to organisational culture, but the effects of increased remote work on possible changes in organisational culture have not yet been studied to a great extent. In the context of the Finnish Defence Forces, this type of research related to ways of working, the social community, and its culture is limited too. The aim of this study is therefore to provide new information regarding remote work and how this work design affects organisational culture. These research topics are very important nationally and internationally

for researchers, and this study can expand the current research. From the practical viewpoint, today, different organisations are actively considering, among other things, how to achieve the public reputation of a modern organisation for flexible forms of work and attractiveness for recruiting talented employees. Therefore, it is worth investigating the answer to the following research question: What kind of changes have the employees of the Finnish Defence Forces experienced in the organisational culture as remote work has become more common?

Theoretical background

Remote work as an organisational change

The increase in remote work can be seen as a change in working methods as well as management methods. When a previously familiar way of working becomes different, it can cause varying and divergent feelings among the personnel. These feelings are influenced by complex emotions and factors related to personality, attitude, and life experiences. While one may see change as an inspiration, for another it may cause more fear or uncertainty about the future, which generally manifests itself as an attitude against change. The phenomenon is better known as resistance to change (Warrick, 2023). Resistance to change refers to resistance and criticism of change or its design, which manifests itself in the behaviour of individuals or groups. It manifests itself, for example, as indifference, rejection of information, or heightened self-protection. Resistance to change is related to the tendency of the human mind to defend its old habits. Resistance to change is a natural part of any change process. Change planning, change management, communication, and overcoming resistance to change are seen as the sole main factors for successful and permanent organisational culture change. Change management, in particular, is a systematic way to manage and drive change. In change management, it should be noted that complete control of the change process is usually not achieved (Gutterman, 2013).

People are not necessarily opposed to change itself, but to its impact on the community, organisational culture, and the position of individuals in the organisation. A change affecting the systems and structures of a workplace or other community may disrupt interpersonal relationships or change the status, or position of power of community members, so resistance to change must be understood. The change itself may be perceived as sensible but its consequences may not. Some people are more excited about everything new than others, who may experience almost all changes as negative, even frightening (Buchanan and Huczynski, 2004). The individual always makes an interpretation of the information received—the aim is to understand the content and meaning of the matter. Trust in the narrator can vary, which can also affect the understanding of change. If a person does not trust the party communicating the change, such as the management, the change can be resisted simply because of how the change was communicated, rather than because of the change itself (Buchanan and Huczynski, 2004).

Individuals are different, so individual values also influence the way we evaluate situations. How the functionality of change is perceived is affected by the information received by the individual and its quality. The new ways of working brought about by change may be perceived as repulsive, but in a positive situation, constructive criticism of the individual and suggestions for development opportunities can help the successful implementation of the change (Buchanan and Huczynski, 2004). Resistance to change cannot only be seen as a bad thing but it can also lead to better practices in the organisation. If staff can come up with ideas for improving the proposed change, the change will probably be easier to accept. Understanding staff emotions during a change situation is important to

achieve change goals (Buchanan and Huczynski, 2004). The role of immediate managers in change situations is significant, and it can be argued that immediate managers can easily fail in change management if they have the wrong attitude towards the people they lead. Immediate managers cannot successfully lead members of an organisation whom they do not respect and do not trust. Even in times of change, the prerequisite for effective management almost always starts from the immediate managers' principled commitment to respect the employees being led and to appreciate differences (O'Toole, 1995).

Remote working as a factor shaping organisational culture

Organisational culture is shaped and reflects the diverse values, concepts of people, and ways of working that are manifested in the organisations. Organisational culture lays the foundation for organisational behavioural patterns. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the shift to remote working has been a new situation for employees due to external forces, which may have affected employees' mindsets in an unplanned way and therefore also the organisational culture. According to Alvesson (2002), commitment to shared values, norms, and beliefs has a positive effect on efficiency. Shared values build a strong culture in an organisation, which is one of the factors of efficiency. According to Galanti *et al.* (2021), the transition to remote working is usually systematic. However, the coronavirus pandemic brought about a rapid change, which meant that there was little time to plan and prepare for the transition to remote working. It is possible that uncontrolled change may also lead to negative consequences for the organisation. Negative changes in organisational culture can be thought of as a decrease in communication, a decrease in the presentation of new opinions, and a decrease in learning and challenges in management.

Organisational culture change has often been seen as a challenging and slow process (Wolf *et al.* 2022). However, Bourne and Jenkins (2013) have stated that changes in values occur when one has to adapt to new situations. The widespread and even total shift to remote work took place quickly in the special COVID-19 pandemic situation, so it is possible that changes in organisational culture may also be seen to have taken place relatively quickly, in both norms and values. However, the purpose of this theory section is not to form presuppositions, but the material is allowed to speak separately from the previous theory in the section on the results.

Methods and data

The current qualitative study was one part of the bigger research entity, which included both qualitative and quantitative data. The qualitative data for this study was collected in January 2023 in five units of the Finnish Defence Forces: (1) Air Force Command, (2) Army Command, (3) Navy Command, (4) the Pori Brigade, and (5) the Karelia Brigade. A total of 2,222 employees received an anonymous survey link via email. A total of 868 responses were returned, yielding a useable response rate of 39% for the entire survey. The background information of the respondents is given in Table 1. An open-ended question about cultural changes was presented, and was formulated as follows: Do you feel that there have been any changes in the organisational culture of the Finnish Defence Forces due to the increased use of remote work? The total number of open responses from informants regarding cultural changes was 468 (53.9% of the total number of respondents). Through an open-ended question, members of the organisational culture were given the opportunity to present the changes in their own culture as they themselves experience them. The response structure is very representative of the real personnel structure where male soldiers represent the largest group of personnel.

Table 1. Demographic information of the respondents.

Background information	Freq. (%)	Freq. (%)	Freq. (%)	Freq. (%)	Freq. (%)
Age (years)	<25 (3%)	26–35 (18%)	36–45 (34%)	46–55 (34%)	>55 (11%)
Gender	Male (78%)	Female (21%)	Other or not wanted to say (1%)	-	-
Education	Basic (2%)	Vocational (26%)	Univ. of applied sciences (18%)	University (54%)	-
Quality of work position	Fixed-term (15%)	Permanent (85%)	-	-	-
Working period	<1 year (3%)	1–5 years (12%)	6–10 years (10%)	11–15 years (13%)	>15 years (62%)
Nature of the post	Soldier (70%)	Civilian (30%)	-	-	-
Immediate manager	Yes (26%)	No (74%)	-	-	-
Time in the immediate manager position	<1 year (9%)	1–5 years (41%)	6–10 years (16%)	11–15 years (11%)	>15 years (23%)

The informants' responses were analysed inductively using the Gioia methodology. This was found to be useful, as it helped to understand the categories related to the topic and direct quotations, and further to form larger themes (Gioia *et al.* 2012). The analysis was carried out using a data-processing table, in which the data was organised appropriately. The starting point of cultural studies in this study is not to prove hypotheses but to broaden the understanding of the topic according to what emerges from the data. However, in the Finnish Defence Forces, remote work in its current scope is still a recent change, and adapting to it requires time from employees. It is likely that respondents have biases, either in favour or against remote work. The military organisation is traditionally hierarchical. The respondents' opinions can be very individual or even strong, depending on, among other things, whether or not it is possible for the respondent to work remotely due to their job description, and what is expected of their own or other supervisors' management or the employees being managed. Nowadays, military organisations try to meet the expectations of modern and flexible work forms, but at the same time there are many tasks which require a physical presence (e.g. in the training of conscripts or in the special conditions of navies and air commands). Cultural studies are particularly useful using qualitative methods. In accordance with the ontology of social constructivism, reality is built from the individual perspectives of several different individuals, and the main goal of researchers is to understand these complex perspectives of people.

Results

This section discusses the results of the study. Table 2 contains a summary of the results of the analysis, including data samples from direct quotations (phase 1), categories formed on the basis of the data (phase 2), and larger identified themes (phase 3).

Analysis of identified themes

Three different main themes were identified in this study: (1) challenges for leadership, (2) social resources, and (3) development of the work community, which covers all the themes in which organisational changes were observed on the basis of the data.

Table 2. Data analysis.

Step 1: Samples of direct quotes	Step 2: Categories	Step 3: Themes
• All personnel groups are offered the opportunity to work remotely, even if they do not have the tasks, equipment, or skills to work remotely. • Remote work is generally good. However, it puts employees tied to conscripts in an unequal position, compared to those who are not conscripts. • Remote working opportunities have been increased, but at the same time, opportunities for decentralised working have been reduced.	Equality.	Challenges for leadership.
• The Finnish Defence Forces have noticed that flexible working hours increase the well-being, commitment, and efficiency of personnel. • Expertise performed independently is valued more. The efficiency and economy of the use of working time has been noted. • Remote work allows you to concentrate on your tasks, and working time is better available without interruptions and efficiently.	Efficiency.	
• According to my own experience, the management skills of immediate managers in remote work are really lacking. • The challenges of remote management—external training should definitely be obtained for this matter. • Digital remote connections are used better and more efficiently, but certain training on these issues would also be welcome.	Training.	
• The maximum monthly remote work limitation should be removed. • We were going in a good direction, but then jealousy came into play. Limited the amount of remote work. Too bad. • Jealousy and a deep-seated need for control in the organisational culture then forced a return to the current maximum of 12 days a month procedure, which cannot be based on anything real.	Restrictions imposed by management.	
• Although attitudes towards remote working have become more relaxed, negative attitudes towards remote working have still persisted. • There are still entrenched outdated notions of the need for presence and control, and even of intrinsic value. • Remote workers are no longer looked down upon, as was the case before the coronavirus pandemic. Unfortunately, the "old stubborns" were the worst poisoners of the work community, spreading distrust of remote workers.	Resistance to change.	Social resources.
• The trust of immediate managers in the employee has improved. In other words, management that strongly emphasises control is taking a back seat. • In my opinion, the Finnish Defence Forces as an employer trusts its employees more now than before. • Employees are trusted more than before. We have approached civilian working life. This change has been refreshing.	Trust.	
• I feel that the staff is feeling better nowadays, and I believe this is due to the increased possibility to work remotely. • Well-being at work has increased significantly. • Staff satisfaction increased with remote working.	Job satisfaction.	
• The most significant shortcomings are the decrease in social encounters and networking. • Remote working reduces interaction between people in the same space, which is very important, especially for soldiers. • The only negative aspect of remote work is the lack of presence of the work community.	Communality.	

Step 1: Samples of direct quotes	Step 2: Categories	Step 3: Themes
• The use of information technology has increased and people know how to use it better in meeting practices. • The number of meetings and unnecessary official travel has been significantly reduced, allowing time to be spent on more important tasks. • The utilisation of online meetings and related expertise has increased significantly, which creates capabilities for a networked approach as Finland integrates more closely with western partners.	Development of competence.	Development of the work community.
• The possibility to freely work remotely in Finland and outside Finland is a significant motivator and recruiting asset for the Finnish Defence Forces. • Remote work has raised the employer image of the Finnish Defence Forces. • Competition in the labour market for experts in the field is fierce, the unlimited remote work opportunities offered by companies are a competitive advantage and the best experts are looking for work elsewhere.	Employer image.	

Challenges for leadership

Leadership can try to include management at three different levels: (1) line management, (2) supervisory work, and (3) employee self-management. The research subjects highlight the challenges that managing remote work brings, especially to immediate managers. Many argued that the remote work management training for managers does not correspond to the changed situation at the moment. One employee describes the situation as follows:

> In the face of necessity (coronavirus), both as individuals and as an organisation, we have learned to use remote work as a form of work. Remote work, like any job, has its pros and cons, fears and benefits. Remote work fits well with the deep management model used in the Finnish Defence Forces. For managers, managing remote work brings its own challenges. As with other ways of working, managing remote work requires different management in different situations. Our organisation does not have a very long history or extensive experience in this. One of the development targets for future are [is] immediate manager coaching and training.

It would seem that not all managers are necessarily used to keeping in touch with employees through electronic tools in the same way as face-to-face communication, as some respondents feel that communication from their immediate managers is rather limited, and remote workers are easily forgotten, so they work alone. One respondent describes his/her own experiences as follows: "However, managers do not know how to manage remote workers. They do not even keep in touch, but the trust [towards the employee] is so high that they do not even ask how it is going."

On the other hand, many employees feel that communication with their immediate manager is very successful with the help of electronic communication tools, such as Skype, and the use of electronic tools is felt to give them time to concentrate better on work tasks. One employee describes the change in organisational culture as follows:

> Work matters are usually handled very well with Skype, although in the past it was part of the work culture that a civilian employee had to be "in the passport" at his/her desk and even pretend to do something if the immediate manager happened to need it. Now schedules and meeting formats are better taken into account and

not only are all days filled with orders but also given time to plan and carry out assigned tasks.

Some of the respondents point out that immediate managers do not distribute tasks equally. It is certainly the case that even in office work, employees may experience problems in the equal distribution of tasks, but this has subjectively been perceived to be accentuated in some cases when some employees work remotely. One respondent describes his/her feelings as follows: "The work that can only be carried out in the office is piled up for the employees in the office, which can lead to interruptions in one's own work due to the work of other officials who work remotely."

Many respondents take a stand on their experiences of equality and tell at length about their experiences of how remote work is not equally possible for all groups. The respondents describe the strong polarisation that has taken place in the organisation, which means that some can work remotely, some not at all. This is perceived to increase jealousy between employees, bad talk, and, above all, doubts about whether people work remotely at all, even if these doubts have no real basis in truth. One respondent describes the situation from his/her own perspective and also highlights management challenges in managerial work: "The increase in remote work has increased inequality and attitudes towards valuing the work of others negatively. Not everyone has the same opportunities to take advantage of remote work. Enabling remote work depends very much on the opinion of the immediate manager."

On the other hand, those working as immediate managers are surprised that remote working is now generally regarded as a subjective right, even in those tasks where it is not reasonably feasible due to the nature of the work, even though the official was originally aware of the requirements and characteristics of the job. One manager describes the situation as follows:

> Remote work is seen as a subjective right of public officials, even though remote working is task-specific. Unequivocally, not all tasks can be filled only by working remotely (cf. trainer tasks). Restricting remote work due to work duties is for some reason considered to be a violation of equality, and the employer's duty to provide guidance is not understood. The challenges of limiting remote work, assessing and measuring the quality of work, and assessing the effectiveness of remote work, challenge immediate managers, in particular, in valuing and managing remote work.

Many people, especially those in military positions, would like to see improvements in flexible forms of working other than only remote working. The equality of the organisation in relation to different sectors is felt to have deteriorated because, for example, the equality of the organisation has not been achieved. The operational and intelligence divisions cannot work remotely, while in many industries remote work is almost unrestricted. The respondents outline that the answer to this dilemma should be to provide proper dispersed workspaces for employees in these industries from Defence Forces offices around the country. However, there now seems to be experience that people from another organisation who come to work in dispersed work are considered a nuisance at some locations and are not welcome, because all the premises are dimensioned according to the actual number of employees. The respondents point out that resources should be allocated to this, as extensive enabling of decentralised work could potentially reduce inequalities between sectors. One respondent describes the deterioration of opportunities for diffuse work as follows:

> The increase in remote work and the coronavirus pandemic have caused certain inequalities between tasks. Remote working opportunities have been increased, but

at the same time opportunities for decentralised working have been reduced. In this case, depending on the nature of the work, the person doing a lot of classified work is tied to his or her place of employment. In my own work, I mainly worked individually, so I had to live separately from my family just because decentralised work was not allowed. On the other hand, there was also no desire to take advantage of this situation, for example, in the organisation of on-call activities. It was not possible to increase the obligation to be on call for those who are forcibly present, because "everyone has the right to be on call." However, not everyone is entitled to the same forms of flexibility.

Many employees describe situations where managers have felt that their trust in employees has increased because they have noticed that remote workers can also do their work. However, the responses suggest that many employees would be willing to work remotely on an even larger scale than is possible within the restrictions imposed. One respondent describes the situation as follows:

> Trust in the performance of work tasks has increased when it has been noticed that work is carried out remotely as well. However, the amount limit (max. 12 days of remote work per month) indicates that there is no full trust in the personnel. But this is an improvement over the former situation.

The biggest supporters of remote work feel that remote work should not be restricted by norms and internal guidelines. It is speculated that the deep-seated need for controlling management in the organisational culture led back to a limited amount of remote work after the COVID-19 remote work. One respondent describes the restriction on remote working as follows:

> Remote work is certainly not for everyone, and not everyone can do it. But the 12-day remote day rule, based on the solidarity clause, seems very contrived. Even though there was no limit to remote work [during corona], I still went to the office. It just did not happen as dictated by the calendar, but as needed. As a backpacker, I benefited a lot from unlimited remote work.

On the other hand, there is also the opposing view, according to which the amount of remote working should be limited in some way, in particular in order to maintain social interaction between employees. The responses indicate that employees should know each other, probably meaning the closest colleagues they work with in the same office, team, sector, or department. One informant gives his opinion as follows: "In my opinion, the amount of remote work should be limited, so that the employee still visits the workplace from time to time and feels part of the work community. People need to know each other, which makes it easier to work."

Among remote workers, it is generally felt that self-management is at a good level and work organisation succeeds efficiently, and the results of work are achieved in accordance with goals. The respondents feel that the Finnish Defence Forces as an employer has also noticed that flexible working hours and working methods increase the well-being, commitment, and efficiency of the personnel. One respondent describes the improvement in the efficiency of their own work as follows:

> Definitely positive effects [with remote working]. The possibility of flexibility has been understood precisely as a cost-effective matter. Remote work allows you to concentrate on your tasks, and working time is better available without interruptions and efficiently. Remote work also steers you towards an independent approach

to work, which makes working particularly efficient. Networking is also possible using electronic tools. We have gotten out of the habit of visiting another person on the spot to sort out different things. This previous operating model easily took a couple of hours of the working day for both parties.

Social resources

The atmosphere of an organisation is influenced by diverse social relationships that occur in organisations on many different levels. The atmosphere is influenced by the social values of employees and the appreciation experienced by employees at different levels of the organisation. The atmosphere of the organisation can also be sensed by an outsider when visiting the organisation, and this is closely linked to trust, because in organisations with a good level of internal trust, the atmosphere usually seems open and enthusiastic. The research results show that in the units studied, trusting relationships and building trust are considered important for success in remote work. One respondent describes the importance of a manager–employee relationship of trust for successful remote work as follows:

> Trust must increase between the employee and the immediate manager, otherwise things will not work out. This has happened in our own work unit. Depending on the immediate manager, working remotely can easily lead to over monitoring if trust is not building in this relationship. I am happy because I do not have any experience of deterioration of trust in this special relationship.

Although trust seems to have remained in the target organisation studied, the responses also show that not everyone is equally convinced of the benefits of remote work. There is clear resistance to change in the organisation, which means that people do not want to see or utilise good experiences. Many of the respondents feel that attitudes against remote work can be seen within the organisation, which increases conflicts and conflicts between employees or in manager–employee relationships. One respondent describes the slow pace of change in organisational culture as follows:

> The increase in remote work has not had any significant negative effects on the fulfilment of tasks. It was considered a major threat with regard to the coronavirus. The culture remains that being present is "real work" and remote working is more or less laziness and control is particularly important. Now the concern is equality, which does not even manifest itself as jealousy, let alone a sense of inequality. Cultural change is slow, but there are fewer and fewer acceptable arguments for defending traditional value.

Also, at the level of immediate managers, some have observed that certain attitudes and strongly rooted perceptions in the organisation are deeply rooted in the actors in the organisation and still influence the thought patterns of many managerial workers. Many say that the organisational culture has improved to be positive about remote work, but the limitations in the organisation are still very binding, there is resistance to change, and flexibility towards remote work varies too much from person to person. One person who held a management position describes it as follows:

> My own remote work experiences begin at the head level of the basic unit, where I noticed a very strong bias of managers towards assumptions that presence is the most important thing, regardless of the actual tasks and work organisation. There has been change over the past seven years, and many managers understand the opportunities that remote working offers. However, there are still strongly

entrenched perceptions of the need for presence and control, and even of intrinsic value. I imagine this mistrust is related to previous bad experiences in subordinate situations.

Some respondents say that they have experienced a certain reduction in the sense of community in the organisation and estimate that remote work reduces interaction between people in the same space, which is reported to be very important, especially for soldiers. To some extent, Skype communication is reported to be frustrating because you cannot see the other person physically and it is harder to make sure the recipient understands everything. The respondents point out that a large part of the concrete work, especially in conscript training, requires attendance at the place of duty. Some feel that remote work should not be completely unlimited, and one respondent describes it this way:

> I feel that remote work should not be done unlimitedly, as according to my own observations, the increase in remote work has reduced working together within the organization—nowadays things are done by phone and posts may only be handled. Doing it alone will not achieve anything meaningful. Especially after the coronavirus, I think this change has been quite radical.

According to the informants, changes in strategies, operating models, norms, and unwritten rules were noticeable in the Finnish Defence Forces. According to some respondents, the most significant shortcoming of remote working is the reduction in social encounters and networking. As informal encounters decrease, some feel that it shapes the culture towards using more formal and organisational ways of focusing and agreeing on details. The transfer of tacit knowledge from one employee to another is also reported to become more difficult in remote work. One respondent describes it as follows:

> Work communities are no longer what they used to be. There is much less face-to-face conversation and you do not get to know your colleagues. Also, face-to-face gatherings in the same space often produce better results in some situations. Nowadays, you can often notice that many "good" things happen when people genuinely meet. On the other hand, some things can be promoted much more effectively through remote working.

On the other hand, there are also plenty of opinions in which remote work is perceived to have mainly positive aspects, and even the reduction in face-to-face encounters is not considered problematic. There are also experiences that remote working as such is not the only reason for the decrease in encounters and discussions. The responses show that the workload and rush have increased, which also contribute to narrowing down close communication. One respondent describes the situation as follows:

> In the midst of the current rush, I do not recognise that the possibility of remote work is an effective cause of change in organisational culture. In other words, even if you do "face-to-face work," communication is increasingly taking place over the network "facelessly," even if the interlocutor is in the same building. I recognise changes in organisational culture due to reduced encounters and communication, but I do not attribute this to remote work but to a general increase in workload.

Respondents report that face-to-face meetings have decreased significantly, which most people think is good for costs and time. However, face-to-face meetings and scheduled meetings also have their supporters. Some express their own view that you see people face to face much less than before, which distances you from each other. You do not get to know new employees as you do in local work, and you do not always even recognise

the newest person in your own department. One soldier describes his position as follows: "Managers are less frequently met these days. I am a product of military training in the 80s and I like to agree on important matters face to face."

However, it seems that job satisfaction has increased for many because, among other things, flexible forms of working make it easier to combine work and free time. Some respondents say that remote work is now considered a completely normal form of work. This is described as an excellent change and makes the family's everyday life much easier and thus also increases the employees' motivation to work. One respondent explains: "Attitudes towards remote work have clearly improved and I hope that restrictions will be lifted further. The possibility of remote working greatly improves the reconciliation of work and family life and saves valuable hours on daily commutes."

Development of the work community

The Finnish Defence Forces seem to have improved their employer image in the eyes of employees by offering flexible forms of work. Some feel that the introduction of remote work into the Finnish Defence Forces' range of forms of work at a fairly early stage, as remote work increased, was the most significant change in the organisational culture, which is often perceived as outdated and rigid. Employees feel that the Finnish Defence Forces were much more prepared for the COVID-19 isolation than many other employers. Many report that the Finnish Defence Forces have generally taken significant steps for the better in recent years, and the expansion of remote work has been one part of this change. It is described as essential that the Finnish Defence Forces seem to focus on the essentials nowadays, and the end result is more decisive than, for example, doing things according to the specifics. One employee describes it this way: "Through remote work, the organisational culture has become more diverse, cost-effective, and modern, which also stands out as a positive employer image. The Finnish Defence Forces are also seen here as a pioneer and a significant contributor to reducing the carbon footprint."

Many respondents believe that remote working has promoted the use of digital tools and their competence. They have learned to organise events online and manage work tasks independently with existing arrangements without the immediate support of other people. In addition, there are comments that the threshold for contacting us has been lowered and several different means of communication are now ringing non-stop. For example, the reserved space in Skype does not prevent you from putting an "instant message" or making a call on the phone at the same time. According to some respondents, a huge number of different remote meetings have become part of the organisational culture: there may be three or four meetings at the same time, from which you have to choose what to attend. One respondent describes it this way:

> The possibilities to attend meetings remotely have increased, that is, participation online via Skype or TLII environment with Jabber. In a way, the coronavirus period forced this, and it has also been used since the pandemic. It is more cost-effective to attend a half-day meeting from a workplace or remotely from home, for example, than to travel to another city.

Discussion

This study investigated what kind of changes the employees of the Finnish Defence Forces have experienced in the organisational culture as remote work has become more common.

The study was interested in increasing understanding of employees' subjective experiences and thus forming a view of what kind of themes began to recur in the responses of different informants. The study identified three different main themes where changes or challenges had taken place that shaped organisational culture. These included (1) challenges for leadership, (2) social resources, and (3) development of the work community.

Remote work challenges leadership

This study revealed that remote work creates challenges for leadership. The organisational culture had changed in such a way that more and more equality, change manage competence, and remote work management skills were expected from management. In terms of management, the informants' responses exude the goal of experiences of equality and maintaining interaction with the immediate manager, regardless of the form of work. In the Finnish Defence Forces, the deep management model that forms the basis of management training is also very well suited as a starting point for managing remote work. The Finnish Defence Forces' management and interaction training has utilised the deep management model since 1998 (Nissinen, 2001). Deep management emphasises leading people—not things—where the goal is the manager's lifelong growth and development as a manager. The deep management model is a collection of proven management principles inspired especially by the globally leading transformational management paradigm. The transformational management paradigm has its roots in change management in the 1980s. According to Bass and Riggio (2005), transformational management can be thought of as a strongly mental and experiential phenomenon in which a manager influences employees by changing their own understanding of what is important.

In general, employees see that the Finnish Defence Forces have, in recent years, been heading towards a modern organisation that has benefited from offering flexible forms of working to employees in recruitment, among other things. Although, according to the results of this study and previous studies (Kähkönen, 2023), remote work can be found to increase the personnel's self-management ability and efficiency at work, for organisational management it creates challenges that can no longer necessarily be solved with old management models. Management by command can no longer be considered particularly suitable for the image of a modern organisation. This study revealed that the role of managers, in particular, is very important for feelings of success in remote work. In the same way, O'Toole (1995) has proposed that in situations of change, the prerequisite for effective management almost always starts from the immediate managers' principled commitment to respect the employees being managed, to value differences, and to build trust. As practical development targets for the future in the Finnish Defence Forces and, in the same way, probably in other types of organisations, various remote management training courses for immediate managers could be useful for organisations. With the help of education, it is possible to increase knowledge, harmonise operating models, and, perhaps, it is also possible to dilute negative thought patterns caused by resistance to change. The study also highlighted the need for training in the use of digital tools, which affects all personnel, regardless of their job or role.

However, a military organisation is a very special kind of work community that creates challenges for strategic management. Many of the military personnel are involved in career rotation and serve in crisis management. This means that there is a regular change in the composition of the management team at different hierarchical levels. In addition, those in military posts may not have the opportunity to work remotely. Traditionally, many leaders want to be physically close to those they lead. In contrast, among civilian personnel, staff turnover is low, and on the civilian side, the military organisation competes for

skilled employees just like any other employer, and remote work is one of the assets in this competition. These issues related to personnel diversity are complex issues that strategic management policies must address. According to this study, the biggest challenges for management can be seen as solving how to strike a balance between taking advantage of the benefits of remote work, treating employees equally, and managing the restrictions imposed (e.g. the allowable amount of remote work). The organisational culture of the Finnish Defence Forces has become more flexible and has taken significant steps in leadership development, but there are still areas where new leadership perspectives and organisational reforms may be needed. It is clear that management solutions do not always appeal to all employees equally or at exactly the same time. Nevertheless, it is important that clear strategies have been formed and are communicated adequately to the personnel. Clear remote working practices create a framework for cooperation between employees and facilitate managerial management practices in everyday work.

Social resources create resilience to change

Organisational culture can be thought of as a social force that affects employees' emotions, attitudes, and social values. This study revealed that certain attitudes and strongly rooted perceptions in the organisation are deeply rooted in its actors and still affect the thought patterns of many managerial workers, for example. Although the organisational culture was felt to have improved in favour of remote work, the restrictions in the organisation are still considered binding. The results show that flexibility towards remote work varies from person to person. One of the great dilemmas of human life is that people tend to mirror their own lives to those of other individuals, make comparisons, and assume that life for others would somehow be easier, more glamorous, or happier—whether it's work, a relationship, or some other significant thing in life. In the life of another individual, one can see some factors that one might miss in one's own life. These assumptions about the superiority of another's life are not necessarily based on actual knowledge but are subjective views of individuals, which can be burdened by various error attributes (Heider, 1958) as well as the history of one's own life and previous crisis points. Due to this kind of attitude inherent in people, it may be almost impossible to reach a situation in organisations where resistance to change towards new things would be completely eliminated.

Experiences of equity will probably never appear in the minds of employees in a completely positive way. Similarly, Buchanan and Huczynski (2004) point out that there may be strong resistance to change, but in a positive situation where the culture of discussion flows freely, constructive criticism of the individual and suggestions about development opportunities can actually contribute to the successful implementation of change. However, Warrick (2023) highlighted that there is the urgent need for organisations to become skilled at effectively managing change and resistance to change. Resistance to change is not, unequivocally, a bad thing, as it can also lead to better practices in the organisation over time if performed and still managed in a controlled manner. If staff can come up with ideas for improving the proposed change, the change will probably be easier to accept. In addition, if employees in their organisation are able to change their attitude and operating model in a more flexible direction, it will also have a direct impact on the organisation's resilience to cope with various future organisational changes.

This study revealed that remote work reduces interaction between people in the same space, which can be very important, especially for soldiers. However, instead of this threatening effect on the team spirit of the work community, it would seem that the organisational culture in the Finnish Defence Forces has developed in such a way that the staff is feeling better nowadays and the trust within the organisation is even stronger than before. This

is a very encouraging finding and is in line with previous studies (Kähkönen, 2023). An organisation with a high level of trust is more resilient and positive towards changes and reforms, and is able to maintain good operational capacity as well as agility in responding to various challenges.

Towards a modern work community

This study revealed that during remote work (especially during the COVID-19 pandemic), the Finnish Defence Forces have been able to develop the personnel's skills in managing digital tools and their employer image in the eyes of their personnel. The Finnish Defence Forces have also probably improved their data protection expertise—they have learned to organise events and meetings online and they can manage their work tasks independently with existing arrangements without the immediate support of other people. The use of online meetings and related expertise has increased significantly, which creates capabilities for a networked approach as Finland integrates more closely with its western partners.

The opportunity to work remotely in Finland and outside Finland is a significant recruiting asset for the Finnish Defence Forces. Offering flexible forms of working creates an image of a modern and up-to-date employer in the eyes of the Finnish Defence Forces' own employees as well as external evaluators of the organisation. When thinking about remote working practices, it can be useful to pick out the best parts of employees' good experiences and, on the other hand, tackle factors that can lead to the organisational culture being affected negatively. Remote working the whole time is probably not the best solution, but in addition to remote working, it could be useful to develop other forms of flexible working, such as decentralised work, which means that the employee has the opportunity to work in the Finnish Defence Forces office closest to his or her home. The development of decentralised work could be a great relief and a demonstration of equality for military personnel who are often assigned to any location around the country and this can lead to long periods of separation from their own families. To sum up, even if people work remotely extensively, a visit to the workplace even occasionally can help combine the best aspects of remote working and on-site work.

Reliability and limitations of research

The purpose of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of whether employees of the Finnish Defence Forces felt that increased remote work had shaped the organisational culture in any way. Social constructivists act as interpreters of the diverse perspectives of informants. Research subjects often include phenomena that focus on the processes of interaction between individuals. Since reality is seen as subjective, constructivist researchers also acknowledge their own subjective position as a constraint, and do not even strive for complete objectivity. The first limitation of this study is that the researcher is one of the personnel of the Finnish Defence Forces, so the researcher's own subjectivity must be accepted and identified. In other words, the researcher is not an entirely external observer and analyst, but the interpretations may also have been influenced by the researcher's own experiences of remote work. However, the researcher's ties to the studied organisation through work and studies can be seen as a positive factor in understanding the context, organisational culture, and remote work phenomenon, although it creates a challenge where one's own experiences must be left in the background and focus on rigorously analysing the research data. This challenge was helped by analysing the data using a clear procedure (Gioia et al., 2012).

The second limitation is that when people work together, shared meanings are created. For example, different work cultures produce collective agency and opinions, which means that the respondents' opinions can be influenced and strengthened by the opinions of the surrounding work team. However, research participants always have personal experiences, goals, and the ability to produce meanings, that is, personal subjectivity. In the survey situation, the respondents present viewpoints that they feel would promote their goals and interests (some oppose and some support remote work). In any case, the purpose is to describe the world from the point of view of the people being studied and their mutual activities, so different types of opinions make the qualitative material rich.

In qualitative research, the challenge may be the narrowness of the data. The adequacy of the data can be assessed using a saturation point. This refers to the stage in data collection when the collection of new data no longer produces new data. In other words, we are talking about finding a basic theoretical pattern that can be achieved with a certain amount of data, assuming that the researcher knows what kinds of answers he or she is looking for in his or her data (Tuomi and Sarajärvi, 2002). The saturation point was clearly achieved in this study, as similar experiences began to be repeated in the responses. It was then possible to form relevant categories and further larger themes from these. In qualitative research, even a relatively small amount of data can be used to achieve rich and deep knowledge of the research topic. In this study, the data was already quite extensive (N = 468).

Future research avenues and conclusions

This study was conducted in the context of the Finnish Defence Forces. It would also be interesting to study the effects of remote work on organisational culture in other types of organisations, such as businesses. Studies on different national cultures, where attitudes towards remote work and work in general may be very different from those in Finland, would also be welcome. This study has identified themes and categories in which organisational culture has been perceived to have changed due to remote work. At the same time, the identified categories also form dimensions that can be measured through quantitative research, which different organisations and researchers can utilise in their own research. Continuing research into remote working and raising awareness of, among other things, good remote working practices and successful management of remote working are currently highly recommended. Today, research of remote work is a critically important topic nationally and internationally for researchers, and this study can expand the current research. Presumably, this is the first study to map employees' experiences of remote work from the perspective of changes in the organisational culture of the Finnish Defence Forces. The research provides novel information that can be utilised in developing the operations, management, and work practices of organisations. In conclusion, it seems that the Finnish Defence Forces have taken significant steps towards a modern and flexible work community and organisational culture. However, there are still some challenges to be solved in terms of how to improve leadership of remote work. On the other hand, a particularly important resource in resilience to change is the trust that is manifested in the organisational culture of the Finnish Defence Forces.

Data Availability Statement

The data presented in this study is available on request from the corresponding author.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author. The author read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

References

Alvesson, M. (2002) *Understanding organizational culture*. London: Sage.

Alvesson, M. and Sveningsson, S. (2016) *Changing organizational culture: cultural change work in progress*. London: Routledge.

Bass, B.M. and Riggio, R.E. (2005) *Transformational leadership*, 2nd edn. New York, NY: Psychology Press.

Bourne, H. and Jenkins, M. (2013) 'Organizational values: A dynamic perspective', *Organization Studies*, 34(4), pp. 495–514. doi: 10.1177/0170840612467155.

Buchanan, D. and Huczynski, A. (2004) *Organizational behaviour: an introductory text (Instructor's manual)*. Harlow: Financial Times/Prentice Hall.

Cunliffe, A. (2008) *Organization theory*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage.

Di Martino, V. and Wirth, L. (1990) 'Telework: A new way of working and living', *International Labour Review*, 129(5), pp. 529–554.

Ford, J.D. and Ford, L.W. (1994) 'Logics of identity, contradiction, and attraction in change', *Academy of Management Review*, 19(4), pp. 756–785. doi: 10.2307/258744.

Galanti, T., Guidetti, G., Mazzei, E., Zappalà, S. and Toscano, F. (2021) 'Work from home during the COVID-19 outbreak: The impact on employees' remote work productivity, engagement, and stress', *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine*, 63(7), pp. e426–e432. doi: 10.1097/JOM.0000000000002236.

Gioia, D., Corley, K. and Hamilton, A. (2012) 'Seeking qualitative rigor in inductive research–Notes on the Gioia methodology', *Organizational Research Methods*, 16(1), pp. 15–31. doi: 10.1177/1094428112452151.

Gutterman, A.S. (2013) 'Challenges for leaders: Assessing and changing organizational culture', *International Journal on Leadership*, 1(1), pp. 1–6.

Heider, F. (1958) *The psychology of interpersonal relations*. New York, NY: Wiley.

Kinnunen, U., Feldt, T. and Mauno, S. (2005) *Työ leipälajina: työhyvinvoinnin psykologiset perusteet*. Jyväskylä: PS-Kustannus.

Kähkönen, T. (2023) 'Remote work during the COVID-19 pandemic: Identification of working life impacts, employees' data protection abilities and trust outcomes', *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, 36(3), pp. 472–492. doi: 10.1108/JOCM-06-2022-0179.

Kähkönen, T., Blomqvist, K., Gillespie, N. and Vanhala, M. (2021) 'Employee trust repair: A systematic review of 20 years of empirical research and future research directions', *Journal of Business Research*, 130, pp. 98–109. doi: 10.1016/j.jbusres.2021.03.019.

Nissinen, V. (2001) *Military leadership. A critical constructivist approach to conceptualizing, modeling and measuring military leadership in the Finnish Defence Forces*. Doctoral dissertation, Publication Series 1: Research Reports No. 20. Helsinki: Department of Management and Leadership, University of Helsinki.

O'Toole, J. (1995) *Leading change*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Treviño, L.K. and Weaver, G.R. (2003) *Managing ethics in business organizations: social scientific perspectives.* Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Tuomi, J. and Sarajärvi, A. (2002) *Laadullinen tutkimus ja sisällönanalyysi.* Jyväskylä: Gummerus.

Warrick, D.D. (2023) 'Revisiting resistance to change and how to manage it: What has been learned and what organizations need to do', *Business Horizons*, 66(4), pp. 433–441. doi: 10.1016/j.bushor.2022.09.001.

Wolf, P., Verma, S., Kocher, P-Y., Bernhart, M.J. and Meissner, J.O. (2022) 'In search for the missing link: Studying the interrelationship between organizational learning and organizational culture', *Journal of Organizational Change*, 35(1), pp. 135–164. doi: 10.1108/JOCM-08-2020-0234.