The affordances and constraints of video technology for leading remote work – Top managers' perspective

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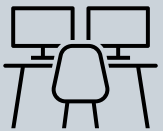PhD, Assistant Professor Laura Cortellazzo

Introduction

Introduction

- The expansion of remote work since the Covid-19 pandemic has profoundly changed the organizational environment.

- When leading remote workers, leaders rely heavily on ICTs and digital communication tools, with video technology playing a crucial role in everyday organizational communication.
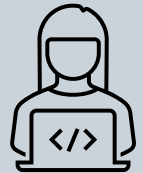
- However, existing research has mainly investigated communication in organizations by focusing on leaders' communication abilities or the quality and quantity of communication, neglecting the interaction between humans and technology.

Cortellazzo et al., 2019; Elyousfi et al., 2021; Landers & Marin, 2021; McKinsey Global Institute, 2023; Salin & Koponen, 2024; van Zoonen et al., 2023;
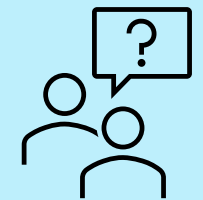
Aim of the study

1 ▪ How do top managers perceive affordances and constrains of video technology for leading remote work?

2 ▪ What are the dialectical tensions between affordances and constraints, as experiences by top managers?

Theoretical background

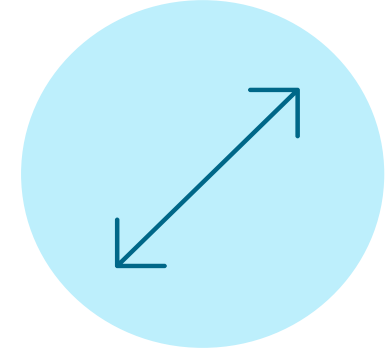| **Leading remote work**	**Affordances theory**	**Dialectical tensions**

- After the Covid-19 pandemic, remote work and hybrid work arrangements have become common. When leading remote work, ICTs play a crucial role.

- Affordance theory considers how goal-oriented actors (e.g., leaders) seek to achieve their goals by interacting with objects (e.g., ICTs) in different environmental settings.

- People can see a technology as enabling their actions while limiting their goals at the same time.

Banerjee & Gupta, 2024; Baxter & Braithwaite, 2008; Gibbs et al., 2010; Gibson, 1979; Jämsen et al., 2022; Leonardi, 2011; Strong et al., 2014; Zammuto et al., 2007
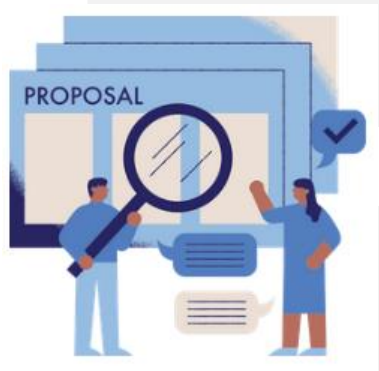
Research gap

Affordances theory has been rarely applied for studying leading remotely.

In the organizational context, affordances have been mostly studied in the context of leaner communication technologies, while richer communication forms (such as video communication) have been rarely studied.

Leadership and management tasks that are complex and involve interpersonal communication, such as negotiations and innovation, would benefit from communication tools that can transmit multiple verbal and nonverbal cues, enable instant feedback, and allow a personal focus.
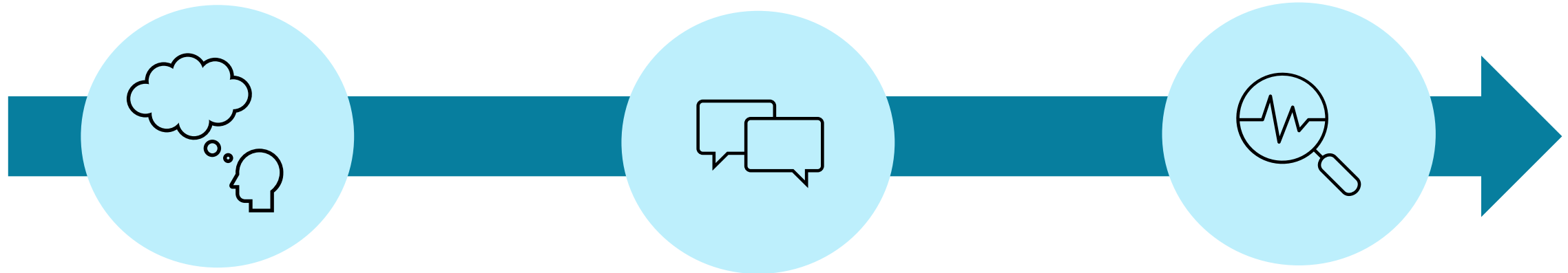
Koponen & Rytsy, 2020; Leek et al., 2016; McKinsey Global Institute, 2023; Queiroz et al., 2023; Schmidt & Van Dellen, 2022

Method

Method: Constructivist grounded theory

Sampling criteria

Sampling criteria for top managers:

1. Is an executive board member
2. Has a minimum of two years of e-leadership experience
3. Has a minimum of five years of leadership experience
4. Works in the IT-industry

Data collection

- Purposeful sampling logic: 3 initial interviews
- Theoretical sampling logic: 30 interviews
- In total 33 top manager interviews

Data analysis

- Constructivist grounded theory
  - Initial coding
  - Focused coding
  - Theoretical coding
  - Building theoretical framework

Birks & Mills, 2015; Charmaz, 2006; Chun Tie et al., 2019

Findings

Five tensions

- The findings indicate that video helps leading remotely working people, as it offers affordances.

- However, using video technology for this purpose also presents constraints.

- Affordances and constraints formulated the following tensions:
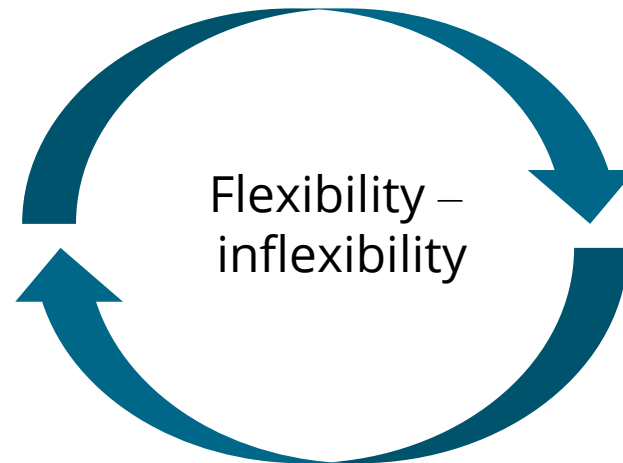
Flexibility – inflexibility

Social connectedness – social disconnectedness

Engagement – disengagement

Sharing information – concealing information

Equality – inequality

Flexibility – inflexibility

Affordances	Tension	Constraints

Flexibility

– Ease of scheduling video meetings

– Video meetings increased time efficiency

Flexibility – inflexibility

Inflexibility

– Uncontrollability of working time (meetings go overtime, calendars are too full)

Social connectedness – social disconnectedness

Affordances	Tension	Constraints

Social connectedness

– Attending online events

– Building trust

– Allowing interconnectivity

Social connectedness – social disconnectedness

Social disconnectedness

– Restricting emotional support, social talk, and nonverbal communication

– Preventing trust building

– Weakening the sense of community

Engagement – disengagement

Affordances | Tension | Constraints

Engagement

– Involving people

Engagement – disengagement

Disengagement

– Restricting innovation
– Distracting concentration
– Causing social absence
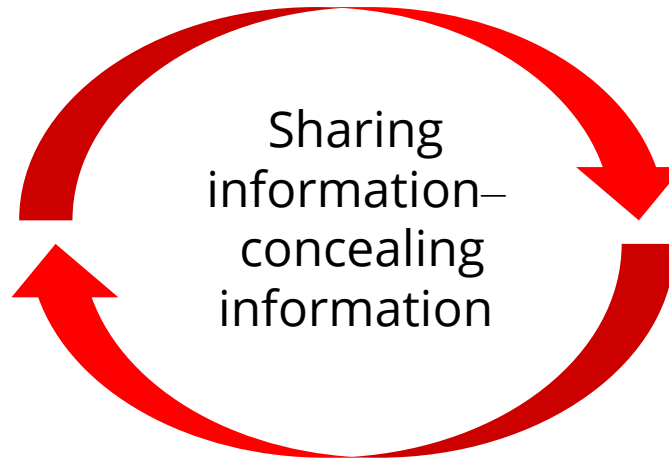
Sharing information – concealing information

Equality – inequality

Affordances	Tension	Constraints

Equality

– Equalizing employees

Equality – inequality

Inequality

– Amplifying employee communication style differences

– Amplifying employee working style differences
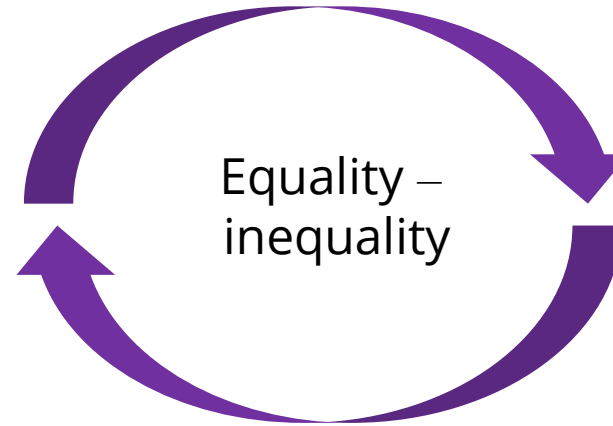
Discussion and conclusions

Theoretical contributions

We offer a new lens for studying remote leadership, addressing recent calls to utilize the theory of affordances.

We explore both affordances and constraints to understand technology-related tensions. Prior research has often focused solely on affordances, leaving technology tensions relatively unexplored.

We reveal the coexistence of affordances and constraints perceived by top managers in remote leadership. We demonstrate that leaders not only balance functional and social behaviors but also navigate tensions arising from the use of video technology while pursuing these goals.

Gibbs et al., 2013; Hutchby, 2001; Purvanova & Kenda, 2018; Rice et al., 2017; Schmidt & Van Dellen, 2022; Treem & Leonardi, 2013

Managerial implications

Tension	Strategy to manage the tension
Flexibility – inflexibility	- Set meeting boundaries and schedule regular meetings with breaks. - Use scheduling tools to prioritize key participants.
Social connectedness – social disconnectedness	- Build a positive virtual culture. - Create virtual social spaces for casual interactions.
Engagement – disengagement	- Establish video meeting guidelines collaboratively. - Negotiate participation methods.
Sharing information – concealing information	- Foster a culture of information and knowledge sharing. - Ensure a smooth flow of critical, informal information.
Equality – inequality	- Enhance inclusive decision-making. - Ensure equal distribution of work tasks.

Karl et al., 2022; Virtanen & Kock, 2022

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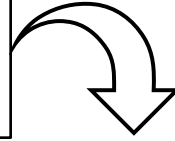
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