



# Communication at Strætó

Investigating the Effects of COVID-19 in the Workplace



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# **Communication at Strætó: Investigating the Effects of COVID-19 in the Workplace**

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Strætó bs  
Professors Roberts and Dominko  
Worcester Polytechnic Institute

*This report represents work of WPI undergraduate students submitted to the faculty as evidence of a degree requirement. WPI routinely publishes these reports on its web site without editorial or peer review. For more information about the projects program at WPI, see <https://www.wpi.edu/project-based-learning>.*

## **Abstract**

The goal of this project was to understand how remote work affected communication between managers and non-managerial employees at Strætó due to COVID-19 and to provide recommendations on how this could be improved in the post COVID-19 workplace. Through interviews, surveys, and focus groups with Strætó employees, we defined how communication was affected. COVID-19 brought several challenges such as a change in social dynamics, new methods of communication, and a movement towards hybrid work. Additionally, Strætó's recent move to a new open-concept office space resulted in increased casual conversation, but decreased employee privacy. We recommended potential improvements such as scheduled online social events, an online check-in system, sound reduction solutions, and privacy options.

# Executive Summary

## Introduction



Across businesses, COVID-19 had a major impact on the work environment due to the expansion of technology use in order to accomplish work responsibilities remotely. One area that COVID-19 greatly affected was leadership. Having good leadership is vital to being able to adapt to transitions. Good leadership encompasses six important qualities. These are: good communication skills, the ability to listen to others, being able to give a clear message, providing motivation to their team, adapting in times of transition, and being creative (Blagg & Young, 2001).

**Figure 1:** A sign indicating directions in the parking lot of Strætó headquarters.

According to Sigríður Harðardóttir, the Director of Human Resources, the transition to remote work has impacted Strætó. They had to manage both in-person and remote employees which caused the need to make changes to their leadership approach (Harðardóttir, personal communication, April 14, 2021). As COVID-19 surged on, Strætó recognized that their company could benefit from reviewing the impacts of COVID-19.



**Figure 2:** Buses receiving maintenance in the Strætó garage.

## Project Goals and Objectives

The goal of this project was to understand how remote work has affected communication between managers and non-managerial employees at Strætó due to COVID-19 and to provide recommendations on how communication can be improved in the post COVID-19 workplace. To accomplish this goal, we investigated the state of communication and other leadership qualities at Strætó from the managers' and non-managerial employees' perspective. The completion of this data gathering and analysis enabled us to identify opportunities for communication improvement and allowed us to provide recommendations to Strætó.



**Figure 3:** An additional perspective of the Strætó office parking lot including the bus lot.

## Methods

To achieve our goal, we studied how Strætó's employees were communicating prior to and during COVID-19 by conducting 10 interviews, a survey with 37 responses, a focus group with 4 managers, and a focus group with 4 non-managerial employees.

The interviews provided us with a general understanding of how the company operated during COVID-19. Both groups were asked questions that addressed how COVID-19 affected their day to day work routines as well as their communication. We focused on how communication was handled between in-person and remote workers and what could have been done to improve the transition to remote or hybrid work.

For our survey, we asked questions about where they worked before, during, and after COVID-19, how they felt the work environment has changed since COVID-19, and preferences about managerial qualities. We split the survey results into two groups so we could compare the answers between managers and non-managerial employees.

Using responses from the survey, we developed focus group questions to help us better understand the quantitative data the survey provided. Additionally, these focus groups allowed Strætó employees to come together to share strategies and ideas for improving their workplace communication.

## Findings

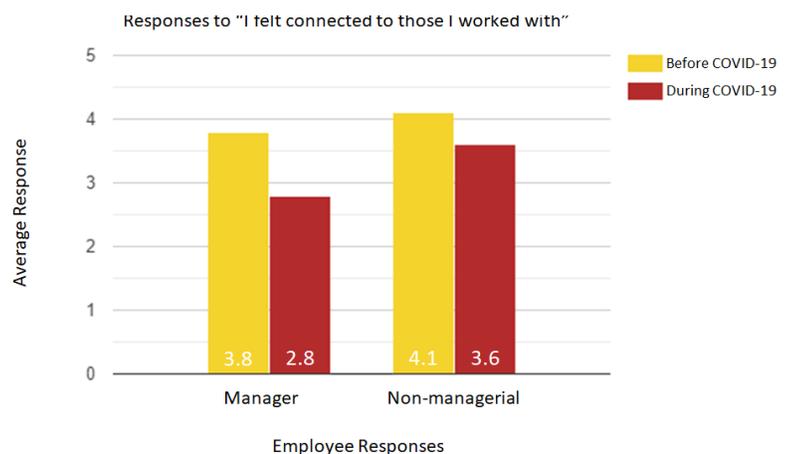
Strætó is an incredible company that has managed to transition to a hybrid work environment very smoothly. During our interviews, we asked employees what could have been improved during this transition. From this question, a substantial number of employees answered that they believed it was handled the best it could have been and could not think of any way to make the transition better than it already was. When asked the question "What frustrates you at work?" all employees answered "nothing" or "no". Both of these questions indicated that there was a high level of employee satisfaction with the company. Managers in the interviews also described that their teams did not "need to be motivated" and worked very well together. Microsoft Teams, the online tool Strætó used to communicate, was identified by employees as "working very well." Interviewees approved the use of remote meetings, one stating that "It is a good positive thing that people have learned to hold remote meetings." Overall, the majority of interviewees indicated that there was "no problem with communication" except for a few who mentioned a lack of casual communication.

The results from our data revealed that the social dynamics of coworkers were affected by COVID-19, and that communication was a well-respected quality of leadership. In addition to this, a lack of privacy in the office was identified as more employees returned to office work. Lastly, the hybrid work environment was overall appreciated by the employees for its flexibility.

### **COVID-19 caused a change in the social dynamics of the Strætó office leading to a loss of connection between employees.**

With the move to hybrid work, several changes were made to how and where people worked. Employees felt a loss of connection to their coworkers when using communications methods such as telecommunication software, Microsoft Teams, and email. These platforms allowed employees to work from home but provided a different experience than sitting in an office space and interacting both professionally and casually. Even as employees returned to more in-person work, many felt they had lost some connection with their coworkers as seen in Figure 4.

**Figure 4:** Survey data for before and during COVID-19 of the question "I felt connected to those I worked with."



**Communication was identified as the most important leadership quality to Strætó employees.**

When asked what leadership qualities non-managerial employees preferred in a manager, 92% selected “Good Communicator.” However, when asked to select from the same qualities, only 64% of the non-managerial employees chose the term “Good Communicator” to describe their manager, as seen in Table 1.

	<b>Percent of non-managerial employees that would prefer their manager to be...</b>	<b>Percent of non-managerial employees that describe their manager as...</b>
<b>Good Communicator</b>	92%	64%
<b>Flexible</b>	88%	88%
<b>Respectful</b>	88%	68%

**Table 1:** Identification of the three most preferred leadership qualities for managers at Strætó.

In both the interviews and focus groups, respondents consistently mentioned that they spoke often with their managers or team members through phone calls, emails and meetings. Multiple interviewees praised the use of Microsoft Teams and how effective it was during COVID-19. This helped us to understand that while there is always space for communication to improve, the communication skills of the managers at Strætó during COVID-19 were almost as efficient as they were before COVID-19.

**Strætó employees expressed a desire for more privacy options in an open office space.**

Many Strætó employees spoke about the noise level in the office. While casual conversation is great for making employees feel more connected, it could be a problem when trying to take online meetings or phone calls. Strætó employees wanted to foster this community of casual, spontaneous conversation as much as possible and wanted to reduce the level of noise in some way. Employees also wanted to see private spaces in addition to their open office space to allow increased concentration and privacy.

**Strætó employees appreciate the benefits of flexible work arrangements.**

During COVID-19 restrictions, Strætó provided employees with the opportunity to work both in-person and remote. Many employees preferred the flexibility of this choice, and indicated they would be working at least partially from home in the future. The ability to be flexible in where they worked was not only for the convenience of the employee, but also increased productivity. One of the interviewees stated, “I’ve gone home for some projects and I just go home and

focus and I work twice as fast." Working at home was a much quieter alternative than working in the open concept office. In an interview with a manager, they stated that "90% of [their] work could be done from home." The flexibility to work in both locations allowed for employees to work from where they could get the best work done.



**Figure 5:** A portion of the Iceland cohort group poses for a picture as they arrive in the country. Emily Austin, a member of the Strætó IQP Team, is pictured second from the right (Boyer, 2021).

## Recommendations

**Create scheduled online events that are purely for fun and allow employees at home to connect with one another.**

We believe Microsoft Teams events with small groups of ten or so people on Friday evenings could help maintain the connection between employees. This specific idea of an incentivised Friday hangout was also mentioned in the non-managerial focus group. The groups could be made randomly, so that employees would be able to interact with those they may not see often. Additionally the event could encourage bringing your own drinks or food and socialising as if everyone was in person.

**Create an online check-in system where employees can let others know if they will be in person, remote, or unavailable.**

A non-managerial employee in the focus group offered the idea of a schedule that tracks who is at home, who is in the office, and when. This way, employees can check-in by stating whether they will be in the office or remote that day. Employees who will be out sick or otherwise unavailable could also add this to the tracker; this way other employees know not to contact them about work-related topics. With

this tool, it would be easy for managers to track where their team is in order to effectively communicate with them.

### **Add sound absorbing decorations to the office space such as acoustic panels or plants.**

Acoustic tiles are a great way to decrease the noise reflection of an area while simultaneously allowing for a creative design or figure that could improve the aesthetic of the office (Soundproofing, 2020). Plant walls create a beautiful green nature wall that not only looks good, but reduces sound propagation and provides fresh, clean air. Both of these options are stylish and effective ways to reduce noise.

### **Create private spaces**

Strætó could build private meeting rooms that allow employees to get some quiet space at the office. Another option are chairs with built in walls that help block out the noise. Both options are effective and provide their own benefits. For instance, having additional size appropriate meeting rooms allow for individual employees to take longer calls or Microsoft Teams meetings in privacy without needing to book excessively large conference rooms.

### **Conclusion**

From our time with Strætó, our methods of data collection made it evident to us that the employees had an overall very positive perspective about the workings of the company. There were some small areas of improvement such as communication and privacy that could help further improve the already great company operations at Strætó. We hope our recommendations will help Strætó maintain their positive company culture as they move into the next phase of post-COVID-19 life.

## **Acknowledgements**

We would like to express our gratitude to those individuals and groups who helped us along the way. Without them, the completion of this project would not have been possible:

Thank you to our professors Laura Roberts and Tanja Dominko for all their support and guidance throughout this project.

Thank you to our sponsor Sigríður Harðardóttir. Without her, this project would not exist! She helped us enormously every step of the way.

Thank you to all the Strætó employees who participated in our interviews, surveys, and focus groups! To ensure confidentiality, we will not be sharing any of their names - but know that we are grateful to every employee who assisted in this project.

Our sincerest thanks to all of these wonderful individuals for making this project possible.

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## Meet the Team



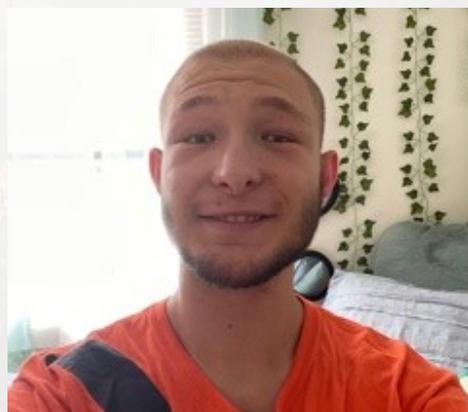
Hello! My name is Emily Austin. I am originally from Clifton, New Jersey. I am a student at WPI pursuing a major in Robotic Engineering and a minor in Interactive Media and Game Design. I am grateful that I got the chance to work with Strætó bs in Iceland. I will also never forget the breathtaking views from climbing Kirkjufell Mountain. This experience has helped me to grow as a person both socially and academically. Despite our shortened trip, I am grateful to have had the opportunity to experience a new culture as well as make memories along the way.



My name is Mia Hopman, and I am a Data Science Major at WPI. I grew up primarily in Massachusetts, but have spent a large portion of my childhood traveling. I am very appreciative of the opportunity Strætó has given our team and hope to keep in touch to see the continued growth of the company.



Hello! My name is Avery Rynkowski, and I am an Interactive Media and Game Design BA student here at WPI with a concentration in Visual Arts. I am from Portland, Maine but I love to travel. Being able to conduct this project here in Reykjavik, Iceland has been a wonderful experience. I am grateful to this opportunity for helping me grow as a student and an individual.



Hi! My name is Corey Logan, and I am a Management Engineering major at WPI. I grew up in Newburyport, Massachusetts but I originally lived in Vermont. I have had so much fun learning about Icelandic culture and I have enjoyed working with Strætó.

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# Chapter 1

## Rapid Expansion of Remote Work due to COVID-19 Challenges Leaders to Adapt

Across businesses, COVID-19 caused an expansion of technology use in order to accomplish work responsibilities remotely. As remote work became more common, companies around the world found it difficult to evolve their leadership strategies. Yoon Jik Cho's 2014 study based on the transportation department of Georgia, found that communication is the single most important factor when it comes to establishing and maintaining trust within a company (Cho & Poister, 2014). With leadership qualities being integral to this process, company managers must be strong leaders who can equally and effectively manage both in-person and at-home employees. As workers were required to communicate both in person and remotely, leaders adopted new communication skills in order to continue to be effective.

## Qualities that make a strong leader

The idea of a strong leader varies depending on the context. To understand why these qualities are important, we turned to the Harvard Business School (HBS). HBS is dedicated to training future managers and corporate leaders. While the managers are in a position of influence by virtue of their title, the leaders are the ones who hold the influence in the organization as a result of their personal ability to understand and inspire their followers (Zalesnik, 2004). It is up to the individual to be both a manager and a leader.



**Figure 6:** Strætó's company logo (Strætó 2021).



Being a good leader or manager is closely related. Deborah Blagg and Susan Young interviewed several HBS faculty as to what qualities they believed a good business leader should possess (2001). These qualities include being upfront yet kind and understanding, having commitment, clarity, and motivation throughout tough situations, as well as an overall ability to be open with their employees and account for their needs (Schultz, 2003).

**Figure 7:** A bus receives maintenance in the Strætó garage.

Additionally, communication is widely considered to be one of the most important skills for a leader to possess. An effective leader must be able to give a clear message, no matter how complicated the topic, that can be understood by people of varying backgrounds (Blagg & Young, 2001). John P. Kotter also reminded us that leaders must be good at listening, just as they are good at speaking (Blagg & Young, 2001).



**Figure 8:** A Strætó bus arrives at a stop in Reykjavik.

## **The effects of COVID-19 on leadership in the workplace**

With the onset of COVID-19, companies around the world have needed to swiftly adapt to new remote styles of work in order to stay safe and remain effective. Managers played a crucial role in this new workplace environment. Throughout this transitional period, it was expected that managers keep employees productive and positive. However, in order to accomplish this, managers must be equipped with the proper training and technology (Transitioning to a Remote, n.d.). As such, effective transition relies upon the proper use of technology related to the new ways companies must provide for their employees. While it is crucial that the staff has access to physical resources such as laptops, employees also require digital applications, Wi-Fi, and training for remote communication to be most effective (Transitioning to a Remote, n.d.).

As a leader, it is always important to check in on those you are leading especially during COVID-19. A good leader should be checking in with employees often, asking questions about how they are doing and what assistance they need to continue doing their best (Raffoni, 2020). If an employee is not doing well as a result of changes, it can be a good idea to provide additional training sessions to help ensure their comfort with online tools as well as that of those they work with (Raffoni, 2020). COVID-19 has made life challenging for many, and aside from the difficulties of working remotely, many individuals suffered from depression due to being isolated. COVID-19 has tripled the rate of depression in US adults in all demographic groups. A research team from Boston University conducted a study of 1,441 respondents concerning their mental health during COVID-19. Of the adult respondents, 27.8% reported symptoms of depression, as opposed to 8.5% from the year before (Beusekom, 2020). With a strong, resilient leader, COVID-19 can instead be an opportunity for growth within a team. If a leader can find a way to inspire their team around a single, solid purpose, it can be an effective tool to boost trust and morale (Raffoni, 2020).

More than ever, individuals wished to be a part of something. Virtual community building techniques, such as social hours or fitness groups helped people feel less isolated, and built trust within a group (Raffoni, M. 2020). People also wanted to celebrate the good, instead of dwelling on the bad, and during COVID-19, almost anything could have been considered a "win". A leader's job is to make sure everyone feels comfortable and happy; sharing these "wins" with others on the team is one method of creating a cohesive group (Raffoni, 2020).

The change to remote work was not the final transition companies faced in the previous year. As organizations grew more comfortable with working remotely, employees created new habits that could be beneficial going forward. While the return to an in-person environment brought many positive aspects, employees also grieved the loss of flexibility they had previously had in work-at-home conditions (Austin et al., 2021).

This unique problem forced managers to adjust their methods to best suit the needs of their employees during this time.

## A case study of the Strætó bus service in Reykjavik, Iceland

Strætó is a cultural icon for the Icelandic people. "Strætó" is synonymous with "bus", as Strætó's yellow busses are the only ones found in Iceland. Strætó has 27 bus routes around the capital, Reykjavik, as shown in Figure 9, and 21 routes outside the city area (Haraldsdóttir, 2019).



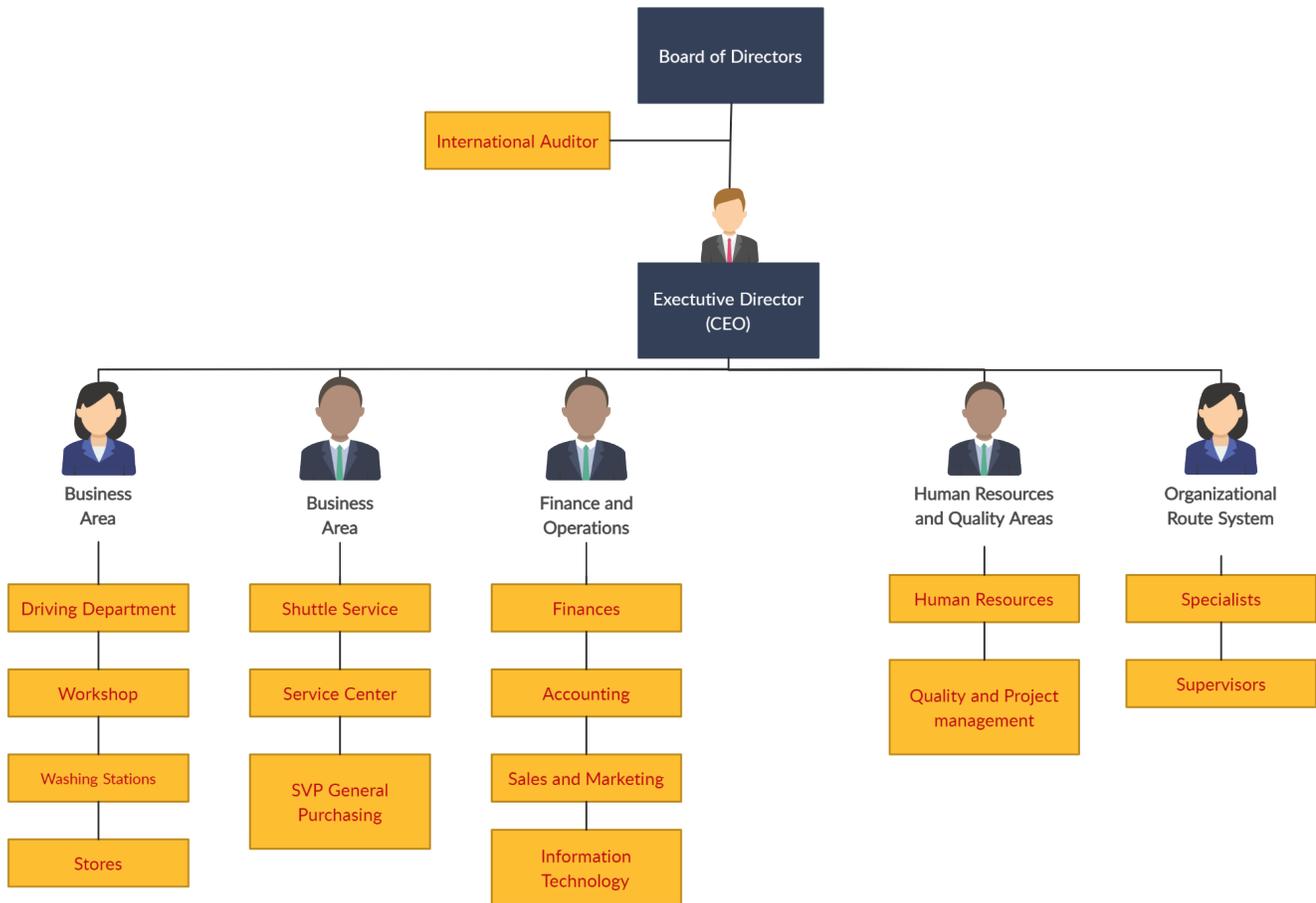
**Figure 9:** A map of the bus routes around Iceland (Strætó bs, 2021).

As the only company providing public transportation in Iceland, Strætó is held to a high standard of quality, and provides many additional services to riders. Strætó offers free Wi-Fi while riding the bus, tap card payments, as well as a bus tracking app that doubles as a way for riders to pay with their phone (Strætó, n.d). Strætó employs 297 individuals, 176 of which are bus drivers. There are 15 divisions at Strætó, separated

into four major groups, as shown in Figure 11. These groups are: the business area, including bus drivers, bus maintenance, the service center, shuttle service, and Stætó's store; finance and operations: including finances, accounting, sales and marketing, and information technology; human resources and quality areas, and the organizational route system. Each of these groups has a manager, although these managers function more as team leaders. Managers report to the company's CEO, and the CEO is held accountable to the Board of Directors.



**Figure 10:** Gompei travels to Reykjavik, Iceland (Mayor, 2021).



**Figure 11:** Managerial structure at Strætó.

Of the four groups, the bus drivers were the least affected by COVID-19, as most employees were still required to be entirely in person, but there were shifts to remote work in the other departments as well. Specifically, Information Technology appears to have been the most affected by COVID-19, as even their manager went fully remote.

According to Sigríður Harðardóttir, the Director of Human Resources at Strætó, the transition to remote work has impacted Strætó, especially due to Iceland's changing restrictions on in-person gatherings. They had to manage both in-person and remote employees which caused the need to make changes to their leadership approach (Harðardóttir, personal communication, April 14, 2021). As COVID-19 surged on, Strætó recognized that their company could benefit from reviewing the impacts of COVID-19.

# Chapter 2

## Methodology

The goal of this project was to understand how remote work has affected communication between managers and non-managerial employees at Strætó due to COVID-19 and to provide recommendations on how communication can be improved in the post COVID-19 workplace. To accomplish this goal, we investigated the state of communication at Strætó from the managers' and non-managerial employees' perspective. The completion of this data gathering and analysis enabled us to identify opportunities for improvement and allowed us to provide recommendations to Strætó.

## Investigating the state of communication at Strætó from the employees' perspectives.

We first needed to identify how the company was operating on a day-to-day basis. To achieve this, we studied how Strætó's employees were communicating prior to and during COVID-19 by conducting interviews, surveys, and focus groups with both the managers and non-managerial employees.

Prior to our arrival to Iceland, we held ten individual interviews over Zoom with Strætó employees from varying departments and positions. These interviews were conducted one on one, in addition to a note-taker, and focused on the overall atmosphere within the company before and during COVID-19. To begin, we opened the interviews with simple icebreaker questions such as "How long have you been working for Strætó?" and "What department do you work for?" Within those ten interviewees, we had six managers and four non-managerial employees. Both groups were asked questions that addressed how COVID-19 affected their day to day work routines as well as their communication. We focused on how communication was handled between in-person and remote workers and what could have been done to improve the transition to hybrid work. After those initial questions, we split our interview questions into separate categories for managers and non-managerial employees (See Appendix A for a full list of interview questions).

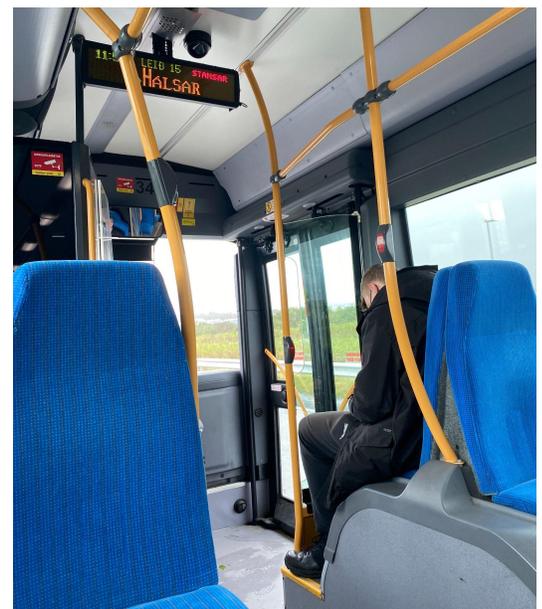
For managers, the second part of the interview focused on their motivational strategies and how they kept in touch and connected with their team during the remote work period. In addition, we investigated what strengths they have brought to Strætó and whether or not they felt respected by their teams and other fellow employees.

For the non-managerial employees, the second part of the interview focused on how their relationships with their manager may have changed during COVID-19 and how often they interacted with their managers. We also investigated how they viewed their managers and whether the non-managerial employees felt respected or appreciated at Strætó.

**Figure 12:** A meeting space in the Strætó offices.



**Figure 13:** The inside of a Strætó bus.



While the interviews provided us with a general understanding of how the company operated during COVID-19, we also conducted a company-wide survey to collect anonymous data from an even more diverse set of employees. The responses from our interviews were used as a guide for our survey questions and allowed us to deepen our understanding of communication at Strætó. Our survey was conducted through Qualtrics and asked questions about Strætó employees' expectations for communication before COVID-19 and how these have changed as a result of COVID-19. This survey was an efficient way of collecting data from a large group.

Our survey revolved around two focus areas. The first section of the survey asked where employees worked before, during, and after COVID-19 (See Appendix B). We also compared employee satisfaction before and during COVID-19. We provided statements such as "My opinions were important and considered" and "I felt connected to those I worked with" and tasked respondents with answering how they felt before COVID-19 and during COVID-19. For these questions, we used a scale of 0-5, with 0 being strongly disagree, and 5 being strongly agree. We also asked non-managerial employees questions concerning managerial practices, such as "What management qualities do you prefer or best work under?" and "What qualities describe your current manager?" For managers, we used branching in the survey to ask additional statements including "Choose three qualities that define you as a manager." This allowed us to view the difference in opinions between non-managerial employees and managers. In total, our survey received 12 manager responses and 25 non-managerial responses. These survey questions helped guide our next form of data collection.



**Figure 14:** The entrance hall to the Strætó headquarters.

Using responses from the survey, we developed focus group questions to help us better understand the quantitative data the survey provided. Additionally, these focus groups allowed Strætó employees to come together to share strategies and ideas for improving their workplace. We held two focus groups, one with four managers, and one with four non-managerial employees. These focus groups were conducted in person at an office space in Strætó's main building. We had one team member facilitating, and another taking notes. Receiving permission from respective focus group participants, focus groups were recorded as well. In these focus groups, our questions were directly based on the answers to the survey. We asked questions such as, "Do you use team meetings or one-on-one meetings?", "How often did you meet?", and the follow up, "Did either of those change as a result of COVID-19?" We also used idea-generating questions like "What ideas do you have for making remote or hybrid work successful after COVID-19?" and "What do you think can be done to improve the office environment?" to facilitate discussion among participants (see Appendix C for a full list of focus group questions).

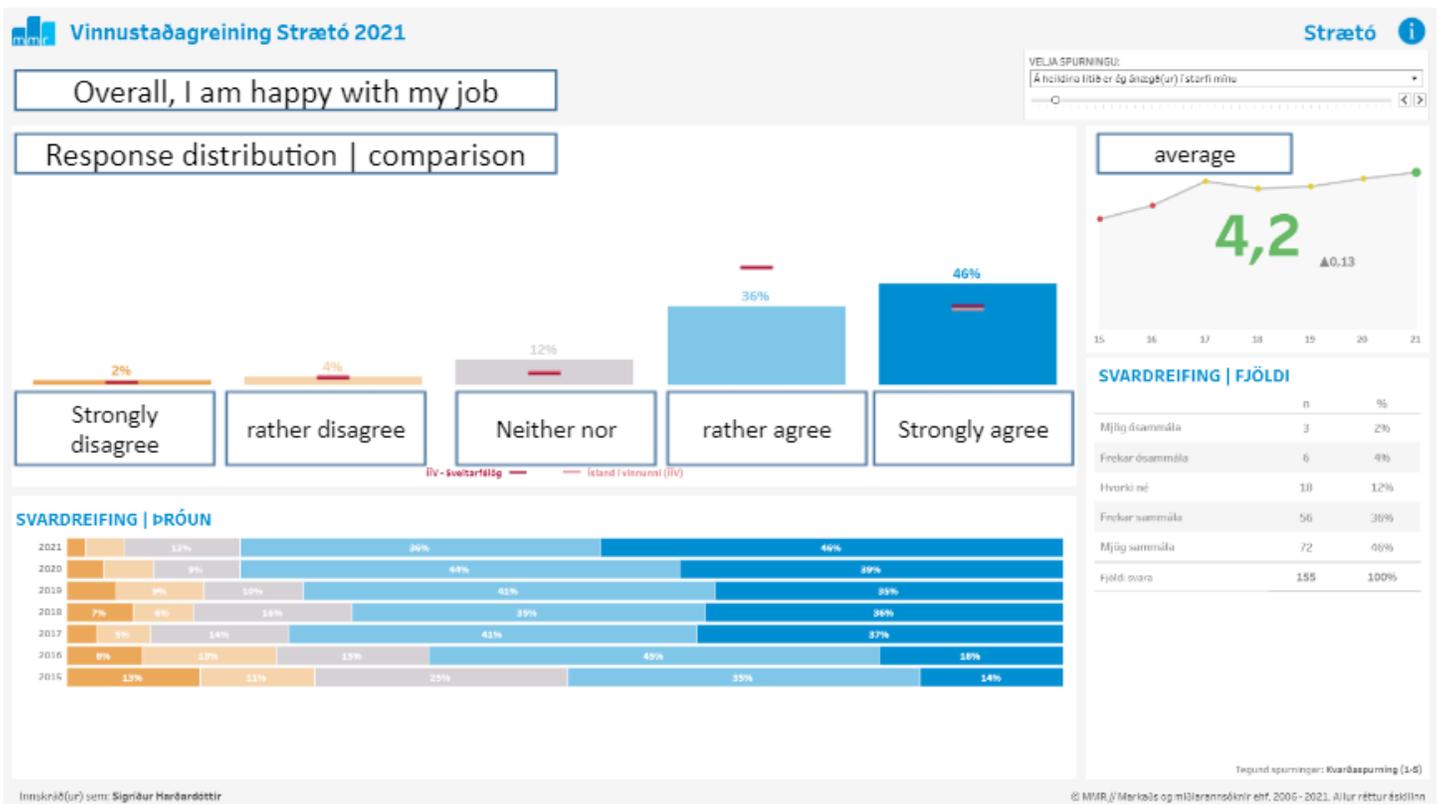
# Chapter 3

## Findings and Analysis

In this chapter, we discuss the current status of Strætó through our findings from various data gathering techniques. The results from our data revealed that the social dynamics of coworkers were affected by COVID-19, and that communication was an appreciated quality of leadership. In addition to this, a lack of privacy in the office was identified as more employees returned to office work. Lastly, the hybrid work environment was overall appreciated by the employees for its flexibility.



Strætó is an incredible company that has managed to transition to a hybrid work environment very smoothly. During our interviews, we asked employees what could have been improved during this transition. From this question, a substantial number of employees answered that they believed it was handled the best it could have been and could not think of any way to make the transition better than it already was. When asked the question "What frustrates you at work?" all employees answered "nothing" or "no". Additionally, in the company's annual survey provided by our sponsor Sigríður Harðardóttir, employees were presented with a statement "Overall, I am happy with my job" as seen in Figure 15. Overwhelmingly, the employees either strongly agreed or rather agreed making the average response a total of 4.2 out of 5. In addition to our other questions, this indicated that there was a high level of employee satisfaction with the company.



**Figure 15:** Response to the question "Overall, I am happy with my job" from the Strætó company satisfaction survey (Haraldsdóttir, 2021).

In our survey managers were asked to respond to leadership questions, and found that not only did the managers feel respected by their teams, but 100% of managers said they trusted their teams. Additionally, 100% of non-managerial employees indicated that they believed that their manager trusted them, as seen in Table 2. Managers in the interviews also described that their teams did not "need to be motivated" and worked very well together. Microsoft Teams, the online tool Strætó used to communicate, was

identified by employees as "working very well." Interviewees approved of the use of remote meetings, one stating "It is a good positive thing that people have learned to hold remote meetings." Overall, the majority of interviewees indicated that there was "no problem with communication" except for a few who mentioned a lack of casual communication.

<b>Did you trust your employees?</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>
Before COVID-19	100.0%	0.0%
During COVID-19	100.0%	0.0%

**Table 2A:** Manager responses to the question "Did you trust your employees?"

<b>Did your manager trust you?</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>
Before COVID-19	100%	0%
During COVID-19	100%	0%

**Table 2B:** Non-managerial employee responses to the question "Did your manager trust you?"

In our survey, we asked four questions about how work satisfaction changed during COVID-19. Of these four questions, as shown in Table 3, only three had a very minimal change in the average answer during COVID-19. In fact, each response only went down by 0.1 or 0.2. Overall, COVID-19 and the changes it brought to the workplace did not greatly affect employee satisfaction.

<b>Managers Responses</b>	<b>Before</b>	<b>During</b>
I received recognition or praise for doing good work.	3.3	3.4
My opinions were important and considered.	4.1	3.9
I had opportunities at work to learn and grow.	3.4	3.3

**Table 3A:** Manager responses to three work satisfaction questions.

<b>Non-managerial Employee Responses</b>	<b>Before</b>	<b>During</b>
I received recognition or praise for doing good work.	4.0	3.9
My opinions were important and considered.	4.0	3.8
I had opportunities at work to learn and grow.	3.8	3.6

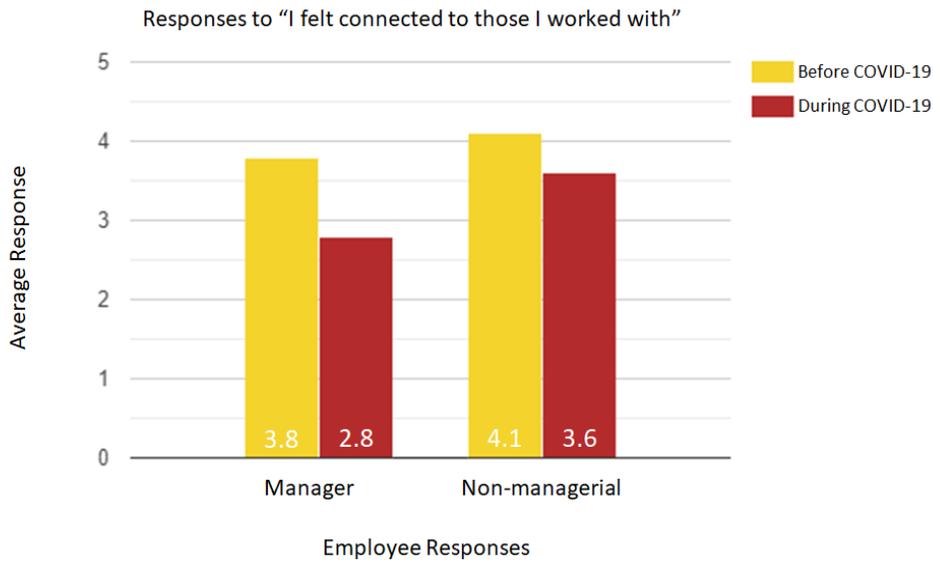
**Table 3B:** Non-managerial employee responses to three work satisfaction questions.

## **COVID-19 caused a change in the social dynamics of the Strætó office leading to a loss of connection between employees.**

At the onset of COVID-19 when lockdowns were in place, isolation was felt across the globe. This loss of connection was amplified at Strætó since they were already experiencing a disruption due to an office relocation. In the non-managerial focus group, employees spoke about how this transition negatively affected meeting culture. Both managers and non-managerial employees explicitly stated in interviews that online meetings could not replicate the atmosphere of the spontaneous and informal gatherings that occurred in the office. This was not for lack of trying; a manager stated that online parties and department meetings were held, but, "they got too crowded and did not really work." They explained that the online meetings, "just do not do the same thing as face-to-face meetings."

A non-managerial employee told us that they would appreciate more team meetings, believing that this would bring the team together more effectively than with email or any other less personal form of online communication. One of the managers also stressed the importance of personal communication in the workplace. They found that remote work lacked casual, unscheduled interactions that often created great ideas. Multiple employees discussed that while working remote, communication was more work-related and the casual communication that normally occurs in an office was significantly lacking.

Responses to the survey further supported this. The responses to the statement "I felt connected to those I work with", are presented in Figure 16. For managers before COVID-19, the average agreement with the statement was at a 3.8 but during COVID-19 it decreased by 1 point to an average of 2.8. This drop showed that managers in particular felt less connected with their employees during COVID-19. For non-managerial employees, this average decreased from 4.1 before COVID-19 to 3.6 during COVID-19. Although this drop was less pronounced, it showed that non-managerial employees also felt less connected to their co-workers during COVID-19. According to the survey question "Where did you work?", only 16.7% of managers and 36% of non-managerial employees worked entirely in the office during COVID-19. This supports the responses from the previous survey question, by providing a potential reason for this loss of connection.



**Figure 16:** Responses to the survey question "I felt connected to those I work with".

**Communication was identified as the most important leadership quality to Strætó employees.**

When asked what listed leadership qualities non-managerial employees preferred in a manager, 92% selected "Good Communicator." However, when asked to select from the same listed qualities, only 64% of the non-managerial employees chose the term "Good Communicator" to describe their manager, as seen in Table 4.

	<b>Percent of non-managerial employees that would prefer their manager to be...</b>	<b>Percent of non-managerial employees that describe their manager as...</b>
<b>Good Communicator</b>	92%	64%
<b>Flexible</b>	88%	88%
<b>Respectful</b>	88%	68%

**Table 4:** Identification of the three most preferred leadership qualities for managers at Strætó.

While the majority of Strætó's employees wanted their managers to be good with communication, only 64% said that their manager met this criteria. Additionally, 50% of managers picked "Good Communicator" as one of the top three traits they believed they possessed. The other two most important qualities selected were "Flexible" and "Respectful." Interestingly, the same percentage of non-managerial employees who would prefer a manager to be flexible would also describe their manager as being flexible. Additionally, non-managerial employees would prefer their manager to be about as respectful as they are flexible. However, the difference in these values was not as significant as for the quality "Good Communicator", leading us to focus more strongly on

that quality. In both the interviews and focus groups, respondents consistently mentioned that they spoke often with their managers or team members through phone calls, emails and meetings. Multiple interviewees praised the use of Microsoft Teams and how effective it was during COVID-19. However, in our interviews, it was also expressed that the amount of information spread through online tools was overwhelming and at some times confusing. This helped us to understand that while there was space for communication to improve, the communication skills of the managers at Strætó during COVID-19 were almost as efficient as they were before COVID-19.

**Strætó employees expressed a desire for more privacy options in an open office space.**

As the COVID-19 restrictions were lifted and employees began to increase their time in the office, it became clear that the new open concept office space lacked privacy. In the manager focus group, employees noted that this design had both positive and negative aspects. The use of an open space was efficient and allowed for more casual communication, but the office could easily become loud as a result. An interviewee explained that because of the shared space you “could be joking with buddies [co-workers] and forget someone next to you is working.” Additionally, both groups of employees mentioned that the lack of private meeting rooms in the new space was challenging, especially when participating in online calls or meetings. As of our study, there were four meeting rooms with one being under construction, as pictured in Figure

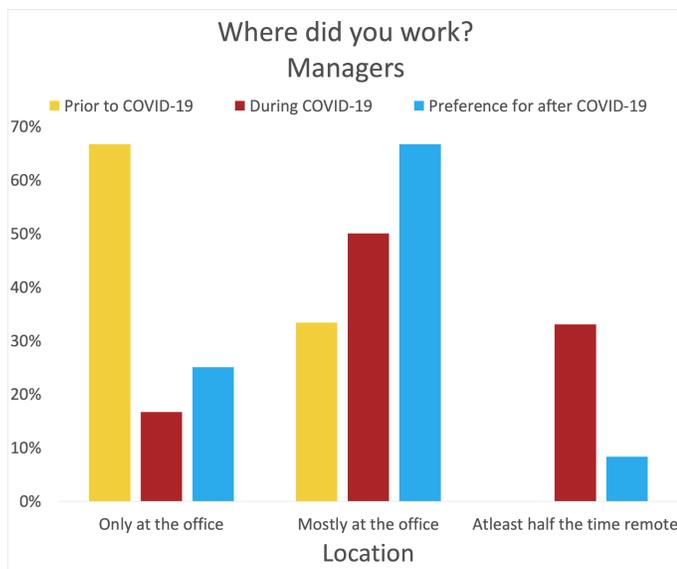
17. The managers in the focus group also mentioned that they were looking for solutions such as “old school telephone booths” and other noise cancelling spaces, as well as asking employees to work at home on certain days to decrease office attendance. The employees appreciated the informal communication that occurred in person, but recognized that it led to less privacy due to the layout of the office.



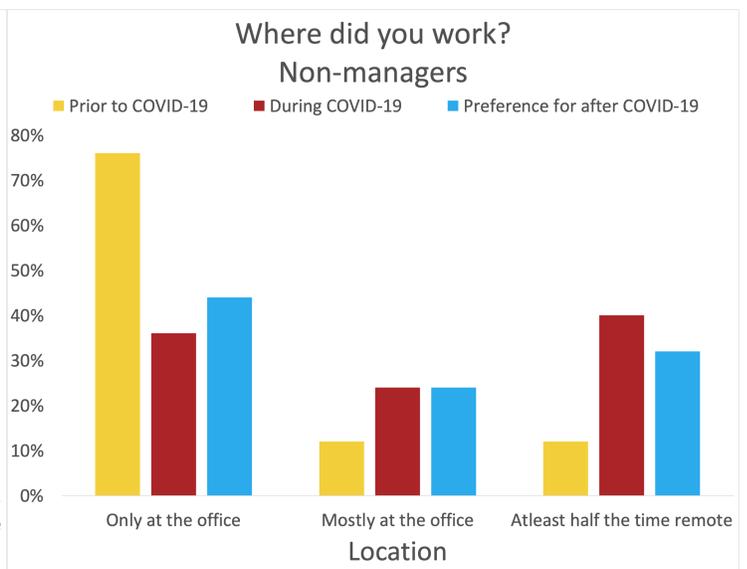
**Figure 17:** An office in Strætó's headquarters.

## Strætó employees appreciate the benefits of flexible work arrangements.

As COVID-19 progressed, the workplace evolved with the introduction of new technology and ways of communication. A significant change that started to become more permanent was the use of remote work. While Iceland was past the point of requiring completely remote work in order to keep employees safe, many workers at Strætó noted the increased convenience and efficiency of a hybrid work system. Only 25% of survey respondents in a managerial position indicated that they would prefer to work completely in person after COVID-19. This was a significant decrease from the 67% of managers that worked completely in person prior to COVID-19. As for non-managerial employees, 44% indicated that they would like to work completely in person after COVID-19, down from 76% prior to COVID-19. The graphs in Figure 18 show the spread of managers and non-managerial employees and where they worked, currently work, and will prefer to work.



**Figure 18a:** Where managers worked before, during, and where they would like to work moving forward.



**Figure 18b:** Where non-managerial employees worked before and during COVID-19, and where they would like to work moving forward.

The ability to be flexible in where they worked was not only for the convenience of the employee, but also increased productivity. One of the interviewees stated, "I've gone home for some projects and I just go home and focus and I work twice as fast." Working at home was a much quieter alternative than working in the open concept office. In an interview with a manager, they stated that "90% of [their] work could be done from home." However, non-managerial employees in the interviews and focus groups noted that both locations provide important benefits and drawbacks. A significant amount of informal communication and connection was lost when an employee worked remotely for a day. The flexibility to work in both locations allowed for employees to work from where they could get the best work done.

# Chapter 4

## Recommendations and Conclusion

In order to maintain Strætó's positive company culture, we propose the following recommendations:

- Create scheduled online events that are purely for fun and allow employees at home to connect with one another.
- Create an online check-in system where employees can let others know if they will be in person, remote, or unavailable.
- Add sound absorbing decorations to the office space such as acoustic panels or plants.
- Create private spaces.

## **Create scheduled online events that are purely for fun that allow employees at home to connect with one another.**

During our non-managerial employee focus group, a few employees suggested ideas for how to maintain connection while working remotely such as organized, for-fun, social meetings on Microsoft Teams. In an interview with a manager, they spoke about how they had once tried to organize a large, social group meeting, but it quickly turned chaotic. However, it seemed some employees wanted to see this idea revived in a more structured or well-thought out way. According to a member of the non-managerial focus group, small groups of people were able to keep in touch, but it was harder to stay in touch with those outside of their department. We believe Microsoft Teams meetings with small groups of ten or so people on Friday evenings could help maintain the connection between employees. This specific idea of an incentivised Friday hangout was also mentioned in the non-managerial focus group. The groups could be organized randomly, so that employees would be able to interact with those they may not see often. Additionally the event could encourage attending with your own drinks or food and socialising as if everyone was in person.

## **Create an online check-in system where employees can let others know if they will be in person, remote, or unavailable.**

Strætó developed a flexible work week where employees were required to be in the office three days a week unless they were a full-time remote employee. Otherwise, they could spend the other two days either at home or in the office. Because of this system, employees may have expected to see someone in the office when in reality they were working remotely. A non-managerial employee in the focus group came up with the idea of a schedule that tracks who is at home, who is in the office, and when.

This schedule could easily be created and maintained with an online tool such as Excel or Google Sheets. It could be separated into individual sheets based on departments, although the entire schedule would still be viewable by any employee. This way, employees can check-in by stating whether they will be in the office or remote that day. Employees who will be out sick or otherwise unavailable can also add this to the tracker, this way other employees know not to contact them about work-related topics. With this tool, it would be easy for managers to track where their team is in order to effectively communicate with them. This is likely the easiest to implement in the short term of our recommendations, and would provide an avenue towards better communication.

## Add sound absorbing decorations to the office space such as acoustic panels or plants.

Within the interviews and focus groups, we found that noise in the office was a common complaint made by both the managers and non-managerial employees. Sound propagation is a common problem dealt with in any office space. The first step to solving it is to identify where the sound is coming from. In this case, according to various interviewees, the entire office space was a source of noise. Based on industry practice, if the noise is generated in the same space, room or enclosure as you, then you should choose a form of sound absorption (Freeman, 2014). These range from wall tiles, to hanging baffles suspended from the ceiling or small walls to stop sound propagation. However, to make the office at Strætó quieter we recommend acoustic wall panels and plant walls.

Acoustic tiles such as seen in Figure 19 are a great way to decrease the noise reflection of an area while simultaneously allowing for a creative design or figure that could improve the aesthetic of the office (Soundproofing, 2020).



**Figure 19:** An example of a decorative sound absorbing wall (Soundproofing, 2020).

Plant walls, as seen in Figure 20, create a beautiful green nature wall that not only looks good, but reduces sound propagation and provides fresh, clean air (*ambius, 2021*). There are a number of ways plants can reduce noise. “One way is through sound absorption. Plant parts such as stems, leaves, branches, wood, etc. absorb sound. Rough



bark and thick, fleshy leaves are particularly effective at absorbing sound due to their dynamic surface area” (Freeman, 2014). Both of these options are stylish and effective ways to reduce noise, but unfortunately are rather costly and are a large commitment to install in an office space.

**Figure 20:** An example of a plant wall (*ambius, 2021*).

## Create private spaces.



Another way to reduce office noise is to isolate the object producing the noise in its own space so it does not become obtrusive to others. In this case the sound was generally from another person in the office so having dedicated quiet spaces where people can go to get work done in a quiet environment was beneficial. It is also possible to isolate the person making the noise by having small enclosed rooms like telephone booths or private meeting spaces to allow for the disruptive communication to happen in an environment that does not affect others. Having spaces similar to what is shown in Figure 21 can greatly reduce noise and distractions so the best work can be done in an open room environment (Parterre Flooring Systems, 2016).

**Figure 21:** An example of an enclosed meeting space (Parterre Flooring Systems, 2016).

Another option are chairs with built in walls, as seen in Figure 22, that help block out the noise. These are a smaller investment in money and space compared to building extra rooms for the sake of privacy. However, both options are effective and provide their own benefits. For instance, having additional size appropriate meeting rooms allow for individual employees to take longer calls in privacy without needing to book excessively large conference rooms. Once again, both of these recommendations are rather costly, and would also take up space in Strætó's already small office, but could significantly benefit the employees.



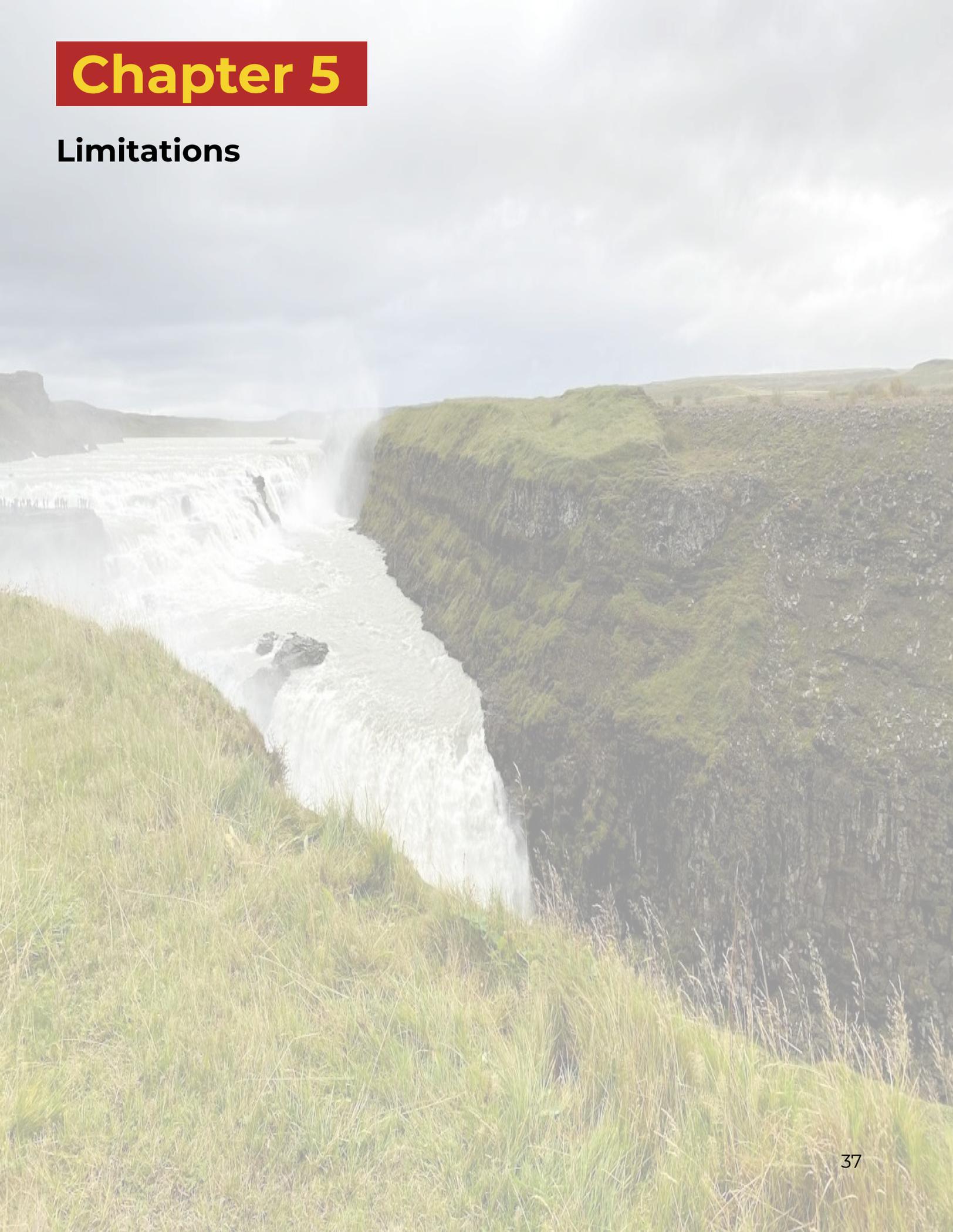
**Figure 22:** An example of an enclosed chair space (Roberts, 2021).

## Conclusion

From our time with Strætó, our methods of data collection made it evident to us that the employees had an overall very positive perspective about the operations of the company. However, our methods also revealed some areas of improvement such as communication and privacy that could help further improve the already great company operations at Strætó. We hope our recommendations will help Strætó maintain its positive company culture as they move into the next phase of post-COVID-19 life.

# Chapter 5

## Limitations



Our project with Strætó was limited by a handful of errors in the survey sent out to Strætó employees. The questions that appear in the “Work Preference Survey Block” (as seen in Appendix B) were originally written to be responded to on a scale from 1-5, where 1 corresponds to strongly disagree, 2: disagree, 3: neither agree or disagree, 4: agree, 5: strongly agree. However, the published survey contained a scale from 0-5, which caused the 0 option to not have a corresponding description and potentially lowered the average of the scores reported.

Another limitation within the survey was the “Questions About Management Block” and the “Leadership Questions Block.” In the former section, respondents were instructed to select all that apply from a list of leadership qualities when asked both the questions “What management qualities do you prefer or work best under?” and “What qualities describe your current manager?”. There was no limit on the maximum or minimum number of qualities that could be chosen. In the latter section, respondents were instructed to choose three qualities that define them as a manager and were presented with the same list. This means that managers could have potentially resonated with more than three of the words from the list, but were unable to select them all since the survey limited them to three choices. Due to the enforced limit on the question presented to managers, the percentages of qualities chosen by managers were lower than those chosen by non-managerial employees.

Additionally, non-managerial employees were asked to specify how often they met with their managers before and during COVID-19, between hourly, daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly. Managers were asked a similar question, "I interacted with my employees..." However, we did not specify the question as "I interacted with the employees I manage...", causing some responses to generalise as the manager having interacted with any employee, skewing the data and causing all responses to be "hourly" or "daily".

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# Appendix A

## General Interview Questions:

Are you a manager?

What department do you work for in Strætó?

How long have you worked at Strætó?

What attracted you to this company?

How has the company evolved/developed since you joined?

Tell me a story of your day to day work routine before COVID-19.

Tell me a story of your day to day work routine recently. Has anything major changed?

What worked well in your routine before COVID-19? Why?

What works well now that things are hybridized? Why?

What has been done to help communication between those who work at home and those who come to the office?

What else could have been done to improve the transition to remote work environments, if anything?

What frustrates you at work? Why?

Is there anything else that you want to tell us about that we didn't ask?

## Interview Questions for Employees Only:

How do you feel about the leadership Strætó has provided to help lead and mitigate problems during the pandemic?

Do you have one-on-one meetings with your direct manager? If so, how often? How effective are they?

How is information shared within your department? Why?

Do you feel respected here at Strætó? Why or why not?

Do you feel your work is appreciated? Why or why not?

What do you do when there is a problem?

How has your relationship with your boss changed due to COVID-19 and work becoming more remote?

How would you describe your manager in one word? Why do you say that?

How would you describe your comfort level with your manager? For example, would you feel comfortable bringing them constructive criticism?

### **Interview Questions for Managers Only:**

How is information shared within your department? How about interdepartmentally? Why?

How would you describe your leadership style?

What do you do to motivate a/your team? Why? Does this seem to work?

Do you feel respected by your team?

What is your preferred method of communication? Why? How is it effective?

Could you tell me a story about a time where you had to make a difficult decision as a leader? How did you come to that decision? Could you describe your decision-making process?

How do you address problems at Strætó within your department?

What leadership strengths have you brought to Strætó?

What leadership skills have you found to be the most useful?

Was there ever a time when you had to complete a task you'd never done before? How did you go about it? Were you successful?

Do you track employee performance? If so, what methods do you use to do so?

# Appendix B

## Strætó Communication Survey

### Start of Block: General Questions

We are a group of students from Worcester Polytechnic Institute in Massachusetts. We are conducting this survey of Strætó employees in order to understand the opportunities to improve communication at Strætó. This research will potentially be used by Strætó management to create or enhance communication training programs. Your participation in this survey is completely voluntary and you may withdraw at any time. The data collected will remain anonymous, and no names or identifying information will appear in our report unless requested otherwise by the participant. This is a collaborative project between Strætó and WPI, and your participation is greatly appreciated. If interested, we can share a copy of our results with you at the end of the project. By participating in this survey you acknowledge that you have been informed about and consent to be a participant in the study described above.

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Are you a manager at Strætó?

- Yes
- No

How long have you been working at Strætó?

- Less than 1 year
- 1-5 years

- 5-10 years
- More than 10 years

How old are you?

- <30
- 31-40
- 41-50
- 51-60
- 60+

Where did you work?

	Only at the office	Mostly at the office	50/50	Mostly at home	Only at home
Prior to COVID-19?	<input type="radio"/>				
During COVID-19?	<input type="radio"/>				
Preference for after COVID-19?	<input type="radio"/>				

**End of Block: General Questions**

**Start of Block: Department Question**

What department do you work for?

- Driving Department
- Service Center
- Finances
- Information Technology

- Human Resources
- Organizational Route System
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

**End of Block: Department Question**

**Start of Block: Work Preference Questions**

Before COVID-19...

Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree	
0	1	2	3	4	5

I received recognition or praise for doing good work.	
My opinions were important and considered.	
I felt connected to those I worked with.	
I had opportunities at work to learn and grow.	

During COVID-19...

Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree	
0	1	2	3	4	5

I received recognition or praise for doing good work.	
---	--

My opinions were important and considered.	
I felt connected to those I worked with.	
I had opportunities at work to learn and grow.	

### **End of Block: Work Preference Questions**

### **Start of Block: Questions About Management**

What management qualities do you prefer or work best under? Select all that apply.

- Flexible
- Unbiased
- Knowledgeable
- Hard-working
- Supportive
- Respectful
- Good Communicator
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

What qualities describe your current manager? Select all that apply.

- Flexible
- Unbiased
- Knowledgeable
- Hard-working
- Supportive
- Respectful
- Good Communicator

- Bossy
- Distracted
- Poor Communicator
- Unreliable
- Biased
- Arrogant
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

How often did you interact with your manager?

	Hourly	Daily	Weekly	Monthly	Yearly
Before COVID-19	<input type="radio"/>				
During COVID-19	<input type="radio"/>				

Did your manager trust you?

	Yes	No
Before COVID-19	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
During COVID-19	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**End of Block: Questions About Management**

**Start of Block: Leadership Questions**

How often did you interact with employees?

	Hourly	Daily	Weekly	Monthly	Yearly
--	--------	-------	--------	---------	--------

Before COVID-19	<input type="radio"/>				
During COVID-19	<input type="radio"/>				

Did you trust your employees?

	Yes	No
Before COVID-19	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
During COVID-19	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Choose 3 qualities that define you as a manager:

- Flexible
- Unbiased
- Knowledgeable
- Hard-working
- Supportive
- Respectful
- Good Communicator
- Bossy
- Distracted
- Poor Communicator
- Unreliable

- Biased
- Arrogant
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

**End of Block: Leadership Questions**

**Start of Block: Focus Group Interest**

Are you interested in joining us in the Strætó office for a focus group that will help further this study?

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

**End of Block: Focus Group Interest**

**Start of Block: Remote Focus Group Interest**

Are you interested in joining us through zoom for an online focus group?

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

**End of Block: Remote Focus Group Interest**

# Appendix C

## Focus Group Question Script

Thank you for joining us today for this discussion. My name is Emily and I will be facilitating the discussion while my colleague takes notes. We are college students at Worcester Polytechnic Institute in the US and we are working with Strætó to identify changes that have occurred at Strætó as a result of COVID-19.

Before we begin, we wanted to let you know that your participation is voluntary and you may leave at any time. You are welcome to participate in any discussion in any way that you feel comfortable. All your responses will remain anonymous. We will be recording the conversation to assist with note taking and will delete the recording once our notes are complete. Do we have your permission to record (PAUSE and check for verbal consent). Great, does anyone have any questions at this point (PAUSE and check for head nods). Thank you, now let's begin.

### Manager Questions

Previously before we came to Iceland, we got to learn about Strætó in our conversations with employees and managers. Those conversations gave us a lot of insight, and we would like to continue discussing how the company operated during the pandemic. COVID-19 presented new challenges in the workplace and our research identified that both employees and managers reported feeling less connected during COVID-19.

What do you think contributed to this feeling of loss of connections? (PAUSE and take responses.)

What do you think could be done to create more connections going forward? (PAUSE and take responses.)

Our survey data indicated that 25% of employees would prefer to continue working either partially or entirely remote after COVID-19.

What challenges do you think would result from continued remote or hybrid work?

What ideas do you have for making remote or hybrid work successful after COVID-19?

Moving on to our next topic, we are going to talk about the office.

Do you feel like the office environment makes it easier to form connections between employees?

Does the setup of the office environment bring up any challenges?

What do you think can be done to improve the office environment?

Now that we have discussed the environment and workplace overall, we wanted to ask about how you manage your teams.

What strategies do you use to manage your team effectively?

Prompt – For example, do you use team meetings or one on one meetings with individuals? And how often did you meet?

Did either of those change as a result of COVID-19?

What were the impacts of those changes?

What do you think would be effective ways to support employees and their growth in the post COVID-19 work environment?

Is there anything we did not discuss today that you think would be important to talk about?

Thank you so much for your time and sharing your insights with us. We really appreciate your candidness and have enjoyed our time learning about Straeto.

## **Employee questions**

Previously before we came to Iceland, we got to learn about Strætó in our conversations with employees and managers. Those conversations gave us a lot of insight, and we would like to continue discussing how the company operated during the pandemic. COVID-19 presented new challenges in the workplace and our research identified that both employees and managers reported feeling less connected during COVID-19.

What do you think contributed to this feeling of loss of connections? (PAUSE and take responses.)

What do you think could be done to create more connections going forward? (PAUSE and take responses.)

Our survey data indicated that 25% of employees would prefer to continue working either partially or entirely remote after COVID-19.

What challenges do you think would result from continued remote or hybrid work?

What ideas do you have for making remote or hybrid work successful after COVID-19?

Moving on to our next topic, we are going to talk about the office.

Do you feel like the office environment makes it easier to form connections between employees?

Does the setup of the office environment bring up any challenges?

What do you think can be done to improve the office environment?

Now that we have discussed the environment and workplace overall, we wanted to ask some questions about your team and manager relationship. Employees indicated that communication was the most important quality in an effective manager.

Can you tell us what your managers do that make them effective communicators?

Did this change as a result of COVID-19 ?

What were the impacts of those changes?

What could they do to improve their communication?

What do you think managers can do to support your professional growth and success in the post COVID-19 work environment?

Is there anything we did not discuss today that you think would be important to talk about?

Thank you so much for your time and sharing your insights with us. We really appreciate your openness with us and have enjoyed our time learning about Strætó.