



UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI

# Creating an inclusive workplace

*An interpretative phenomenological analysis on employee experiences of  
workplace inclusion*

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Author:  
Aili Lundin

Supervisor:  
Beata Segercrantz

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**Abstract:**

Diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) are central topics in today's globalized society. Having a diverse workforce, where employees feel included has been shown to for example increase creativity, improve efficiency, create a sense of psychological safety as well as lead to higher job satisfaction. Previous research has however paid less attention to workplace inclusion and the research is still in its early stages. This study therefore aimed to address this gap in the literature by exploring the lived experiences of inclusion and exclusion in organizations as well as how leaders and the work community contribute to shaping inclusion from the perspective of employees.

The study uses Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as both a theoretical framework and a methodological approach, allowing an in-depth analysis of the lived experiences of employees. The material for this study consists of six semi-structured interviews that were conducted with employees in a Finnish company in the STEM-field.

The results from this study show that employees feel included when they are appreciated for their unique abilities and are valued as a part of the community, but when these needs are not met, it can lead to feelings of exclusion. The experience of being included was reported to have many positive outcomes, including a sense of psychological safety, increased motivation and overall work-wellbeing. Exclusion on the other hand was reported to have negative consequences, such as lowering your work motivation and job satisfaction.

The results also show that employees deem the role of leadership to be important when creating inclusion at work. The leader's responsibility is to be a role model and promote inclusion through facilitating employee involvement, open discussion and offering support. Employees also value the commitment from top management to creating an inclusive work environment. Even though employees viewed leaders as having a key role in creating inclusion at work, they also emphasize the shared responsibility of all employees in creating the environment. The

results from this study highlight the importance of focusing on workplace inclusion and the role leadership has in shaping inclusion at work.

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# 1 Introduction

Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) is a well-discussed topic in today's organizations.

Diversity and inclusion are more established concepts in the organizational literature, while equity is a newer addition (Hays-Thomas, 2022). Diversity and inclusion can be seen as two sides of the same coin but are often described differently in the organizational literature.

Diversity is referred to the way groups are made up of people from different backgrounds and how varied the organization is (Roberson, 2006). Diversity can also be understood as the different elements in the population (Kuknor & Bhattacharya, 2020), which in this case can be explained as the differences between employees within an organization. Inclusion on the other hand describes more the way employees are involved (Roberson, 2006) and how diversity is utilized to leverage individual potential (Kuknor & Bhattacharya, 2020). Equity can be seen as a more practical approach to diversity and inclusion, since the definition refers to fairness, reduction of bias and non-discrimination to ensure equal opportunity and outcome for all individuals (Arsel et al., 2022; Hays-Thomas, 2022).

Previous research shows the importance of focusing on diversity and creating an environment where employees are included and how this is beneficial for organizations. Some of the benefits of diversity that have been reported in previous research include enhanced organizational creativity (Kanniaspran & Mansor, 2018) and improved efficiency (Inegbedion et al., 2020). Moreover, research has demonstrated how engaging diverse employees can foster organizational innovativeness (Yang & Konrad, 2011).

Even though diversity is broadly talked about in this globalized world, little attention has been given to investigating the organizational processes that create inclusion rather than mere numerical representation of diversity (Shore et al., 2011). When striving to create a diverse workforce it's also important to note how this should be managed, and the role leadership has in creating a work environment where employees feel included (Ashikali et al., 2021; Mitchell et al., 2015). This thesis therefore examines lived experiences of inclusion and exclusion in organizations as well as how leaders and the work community contribute to shaping inclusion

from the perspective of employees. The study was conducted using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and semi-structured interviews. The study was conducted in the STEM-field (short for science, technology, engineering and mathematics). By focusing on the employee experience this research aims to help close a knowledge gap that seems to prevail in the current literature. Most of the previous research has been theoretical works (Canlas & Williams, 2022; Shore et al., 2011) or based on quantitative data (Brimhall & Palinkas, 2020; Leroy et al., 2022). If qualitative methods have been used, they are often focused on the leader's perspective, see for example Roberson and Perry's (2022). By doing qualitative research on employees' view on inclusion and the roles of different actors in how to promote inclusion, this study will be able to provide new insights into the research field.

In the following chapters I will first present the importance of DEI for organizations, followed by an exploration of the key concepts for this study. The chapters will give an overview of the previous research in the field, arguing for the importance of focusing on the employee experience of inclusion.

## 2 Diversity, equity and inclusion in organizations

In this chapter the key concepts of this study, *Diversity*, *Equity*, *Inclusion* and *Inclusive Leadership*, will be presented. The focus of this study will be on the employees' experiences of inclusion, but since inclusion is often described together with diversity and equity, both concepts will also be briefly introduced in this chapter. The concept of inclusive leadership is also presented in the following chapters, since the study aims to explore the role of leadership in creating an inclusive workplace and it is therefore important to clarify what is meant by inclusive leadership.

### 2.1 Diversity

One of the key concepts in this study is *diversity*. Diversity is often described as the way groups are demographically composed and the heterogeneity of the organization (Q. M. Roberson,

2006). It has also been referred to as having different elements in the population (Kuknor & Bhattacharya, 2020). Organizations and scholars first started paying attention to diversity in the 1980s. At that time, diversity was referred to as changes in demographic characteristics of the labor force and work organization. A particular focus laid on characteristics such as race, ethnicity and sex (Canlas & Williams, 2022; Shore et al., 2011). The definition was broadened later, when other aspects such as education, geographic background, language, value system and other attributes were added (Hays-Thomas, 2022). Early studies in diversity also emphasized representational diversity. This referred to the process in which organizations bring in people who are different from the current employees (Hays-Thomas, 2022).

There is a lot of previous research regarding diversity and its positive outcomes. For example, Kanniaspran and Mansor (2018) present a theoretical framework based on previous research in which diversity in the workforce has shown to have a positive impact on organizational creativity. The research proposes that diversity in the workforce, such as differences in previous work experience, education and time at the organization will increase creativity in the organization. Creativity is seen as a strength, since it's considered to be a fundamental part of organizational performance and continuity in the competitive market (Bodla et al., 2016). The role of utilizing diversity and involving employees from different background in organizational innovativeness was also studied by Yang and Konrad (2011). Their study shows a link between diversity, employee involvement and innovation, meaning that diversity is linked to innovation by involving employees.

Diversity is in general viewed as something positive that benefits the organization (Kanniaspran & Mansor, 2018; Yang & Konrad, 2011), but it does not always bring beneficial results. Previous research in the field of diversity has also had a heavy focus on the challenges associated with diversity, such as discrimination, bias, affirmative action and tokenism (Shore et al. 2009). Previous studies have also shown that a diverse workforce can increase conflict and turnover (Shore et al., 2018). This highlights the importance of focusing on inclusionary practices that can promote opportunities for having a diverse workforce.

## 2.2 Equity

According to Livingston (2020) equity refers to the fair treatment of everyone. Livingston also points out that this does not mean that the treatment must be the exact same if the people in the organization perceive it to be fair. The aspect of fairness also comes up Arsel and colleagues' (2022) description of equity as they describe equity as “fairness in the treatment of people in terms of both opportunity and outcome”. Equity can be viewed as something more practical, compared to the concepts of diversity and inclusion, since it refers to fairness, reduction of bias and discrimination to ensure equal opportunity and outcome for individuals (Arsel et al., 2022; Hays-Thomas, 2022). Equity can also be viewed as a facilitator for diversity (Russen & Dawson, 2023).

Equity has received the least attention in the diversity literature, but plays a key role in creating an environment where people from diverse backgrounds can feel included and valued (Russen & Dawson, 2023). Even though an organization would have diverse employees and inclusionary practices, equity is needed to make sure that decisions on for example promotions and opportunities are not based on the ideas of the majority group, but that they also include the needs of minorities (Berry, 2016).

In the following chapter I will dive deeper into the concept of inclusion and present the current organizational literature on the topic. The chapter will not only discuss the concept of inclusion but also explain various outcomes of inclusion, showing the importance of aiming for creating inclusive work environments. The chapter will also present the Optimal Distinctiveness Theory, which has been used by scholars in the field to help explain what contributes to the feeling of inclusion.

## 2.3 Inclusion

Diversity and inclusion are often used interchangeably (Shore et al., 2018). These two concepts can often be seen as two sides of the same coin, but they have a different meaning. While diversity is often used to describe the differences between people within an organization and how groups are demographically formed, definitions of inclusion are more focused on employee involvement and integration of diversity into organizational processes and systems (Roberson, 2006). Inclusion refers to *how* organizations allow individuals to participate and contribute, all while appreciating their individual uniqueness (Ferdman, 2013). Definitions of inclusion often focus on how employees feel, the characteristics of the organization or both (Hays-Thomas, 2022). Inclusion can also be explained as the way you embrace diversity and utilize individual's potential despite their background (Ferdman, 2013; Kuknor & Bhattacharya, 2020).

Diversity has been recognized as a strength for organizations, but simply hiring people from underrepresented groups is not considered sufficient to maintain a diverse workforce. Hays-Thomas (2022) argues that employers must also consider processes and factors that have lead people of difference to become fully accepted and equally productive and rewarded at work. This is called *inclusion*. Even though diversity is a well discussed and well researched topic, very little attention has been given to investigating the organizational processes that create inclusion rather than mere numerical representation of diversity (Shore et al., 2011)

Research regarding inclusion is still at its early stages. Mor Barak and colleagues were one of the first to systematically study inclusion in work organizations in the late 90s (Mor Barak et al., 1998). Inclusion has, however, gained more popularity as a research topic, with more studies focusing on for example the role of leadership in creating inclusion (e.g. Ashikali et al., 2021; Brimhall & Palinkas, 2020; Mor Barak et al., 2022).

There are some disagreements between scholars on what inclusion exactly is. Some scholars suggest inclusion is a process, some consider it a condition, some see it as an idea, feeling or ability (Nguyen et al., 2023). Inclusion is often described at the individual level, with scholars referring to inclusion as a person's feeling of being included or being treated as an insider while

simultaneously keeping their uniqueness (Shore et al., 2011). It has also been defined as the “degree to which an employee perceives he or she is an esteemed member of the work group through experiencing treatment that satisfies his or her need for belongingness and uniqueness” (Shore et al., 2018).

Inclusion can also be understood through two practical examples: Task inclusion and social inclusion. *Task inclusion* refers to the degree to which members feel they are consulted or involved in influencing the specific tasks they perform (Nguyen et al., 2023). This has been explored by scholars, such as Ding and Shen's (2017). Their study shows that when employees are participating in decision making (PDM) it significantly influences employees' perceived insider status (PIS). This is especially relevant among contract workers. The study shows the importance of task inclusion in fostering a sense of belonging and inclusion within an organization. *Social inclusion* on the other hand refers to the context of social interactions at work where employees feel involved in the social interactions and dynamics in the workplace (Nguyen et al., 2023).

Most studies about inclusion have focused on the experience of the individual. For example, Jansen and colleagues' (2014) argue that inclusion is an individual experience and is based on how individuals perceive belonging and authenticity. Instead of focusing on inclusion as a group attribute, Jansen and colleagues view inclusion as a psychological experience that is based on how each person feels that they are accepted and valued within a group. A similar argument has been made by Shore and colleagues (2011) who proposes a theoretical framework of inclusion, where individuals' perception of being included in a work group is based on their personal need for belongingness and uniqueness. Bernstein and Bilimoria (2013) also focused on the experience of the individual in their study, which explores how racialized and ethnic minority board members experience inclusion.

Mor Barak and colleagues have done a lot of work focused on perceived organizational inclusion. In 1998, Mor Barak and Cherin created a model called “inclusion-exclusion” that helps to establish to which extent employees feel part of crucial organization processes (Mor-Barak & Cherin, 1998). The model includes three dimensions: *work group involvement*, *influence in decision making* and *access to information and resources*. The first dimension measures how individuals perceive that they belong to a team and how they can influence team decisions. The second one measures the ability to participate in organizational and work-related

decisions while the third dimension aims to measure the availability of information, resources and the needed support for performing one's job. Many studies have tested the elements of Mor Barak and Cherin's model (e.g. Acquavita et al., 2009; Bae et al., 2016; Findler et al., 2007). For example, Findler et al. (2007) utilizes Mor Barak and Cherin's model in their study examining the relationship between diversity, organizational culture and employee outcomes, while Bae et al. (2016) used the model to study the relationship between individual dissimilarity and perceptions of organizational inclusion.

Previous studies also show the various benefits of workplace inclusion. A major outcome of feeling included is the sense of psychological safety (Aslan et al., 2021; Gonzalez et al., 2020; Song et al., 2023; Workman-Stark, 2021). For example, inclusion has been shown to improve psychological safety and reduce psychological distress (Aslan et al., 2021; Gonzalez et al., 2020). Psychological safety refers to employees feeling as though they can be themselves without fear of negative consequences of self-image, status or career and feeling safe to take risks (Edmondson, 1999). When employees feel psychologically safe, they are more likely to engage in negative-feedback seeking behaviors, meaning that they are open to receiving constructive feedback in order to develop their abilities (Song et al., 2023). It has also been shown that the more people view their workplace as psychologically safe, the more they also feel included (Workman-Stark, 2021). Employees who work in organizations with perceived inclusive working environment and inclusive leadership tend to experience higher job satisfaction (Acquavita et al., 2009; Brimhall & Mor Barak, 2018), have a stronger work engagement and exhibit more organizational citizenship (Aboramadan et al., 2021; Panicker et al., 2018). They are also more likely to take risks, including innovative work and creativity (Mansoor et al., 2021). Workplace inclusion has also been associated with recruitment effectiveness (Francis & Michielsens, 2021; Huang et al., 2020), workplace happiness (Mousa, 2019) and culturally agile organizations (Selzer & Foley, 2018).

There are many aspects that contribute leading to inclusion, one of them being various organizational practices aimed at promoting inclusion. One example being a zero tolerance of prejudicial behaviors, since this has been shown to address stereotypes and promote gender inclusion (Kulkarni et al., 2020). Other practices that have been found to foster inclusion are characterized as being trustworthy, supportive, secure, fair, unbiased and non-discriminatory

(Noronha et al., 2022). There are also personal characteristics such as intrinsic motivation, that can influence inclusion by motivating employees to engage in activities that align with their intrinsic motivation (Bidee et al., 2016). Another factor that has been discussed in the inclusion literature is the role leadership has in facilitating and creating inclusion at the workplace. Experts in the field, such as HR managers and inclusion consultants, consider it the leader's responsibility to create a culture of respect and belongingness (Kuknor & Bhattacharya, 2020). Previous research clearly points out that leadership has an important part in managing a diverse workforce (Ashikali et al., 2021; Mitchell et al., 2015). For example, the commitment from top management has been shown to be one contributing factor to creating inclusion at work (e.g. Maini & Heera, 2019; Shore et al., 2018). There are also multiple studies exploring the link between leadership and inclusion (e.g. Aslan et al., 2021; Mor Barak et al., 2022; Randel et al., 2018), showing the importance of leadership when striving for creating inclusion at work.

### 2.3.1 Optimal Distinctiveness Theory

*Optimal Distinctiveness Theory* (OTD) is a theoretical concept that has been used in previous studies of workplace inclusion to explain what contributes to feeling included (Ashikali et al., 2021; Chung et al., 2020; Shore et al., 2011; Veli Korkmaz et al., 2022). The theory was created by Marilyn Brewer in the late 90s and based on the conception that humans have a need for feeling similarity with others and simultaneously feeling a need for uniqueness (Brewer, 2012, 1991). These two needs regulate the relationship between the sense of self and the social membership to groups. The theory implies that when a group membership becomes more inclusive, the need for inclusion is satisfied but activates the need for uniqueness. The basic premise of the theory is that these two fundamental needs work together to motivate individuals to identify with groups and that individuals take on social identities based on how well the two needs are balanced. In practice this would mean that individual's optimal identities are those that make them feel included in their ingroup and at the same time serve the need to feel differentiation by making a distinction between ingroups and outgroups.

There are three important principles for understanding ODT according to Brewer (2012). First, it's important to consider the effect the context has on distinctiveness. Depending on the situation, individuals' conception of what is distinctive and what is inclusive will vary. The second thing is the fact that the need for inclusion and distinctiveness may change over time. Brewer brings up an example of an individual entering a new group. Joining a new group may enhance the need for inclusion and distinctiveness, but as time goes on, the need for inclusion might fade and differentiation becomes more salient. The last, and third thing Brewer points out is that the need for inclusiveness and distinction may be different based on the situation, culture and individuals. This implies that the individual may simultaneously feel belonging and uniqueness, but there might be some individual differences in how strong the need for these are. This is also important to note when analyzing the results of this study.

The optimal distinctiveness theory has been referred to in previous studies about inclusion at work. For example, Shore and colleagues (2011) based their framework of inclusion on ODT, arguing that individuals feel that they belong to a work group when they feel that they are treated in a way that satisfies their need for belongingness and uniqueness. The framework has since been cited and adapted by many scholars, especially in studies about inclusive leadership. For example, Veli Korkmaz et al. (2022) proposes a model of inclusive leadership that fosters both employee uniqueness and team belongingness, aligning with ODT to meet employee's need for both belonging and individuality. Another example is Ashikali and colleague's (2021) study that explores how inclusive leadership fosters an inclusive climate in ethnically diverse public sector teams by balancing team members' needs for belonging and uniqueness, moderating the challenges diversity might have on team inclusiveness. The framework has also been cited Chung and colleagues (2020) in their study, where they explore how organization's inclusion values impact organizational outcomes through inclusive HR practices. Chung and colleagues describe these inclusive practices as HR practices that focus on specifically the themes of belonging and uniqueness, referring to the framework created by Shore and colleagues.

## 2.4 Workplace exclusion

The opposite of inclusion is exclusion and discrimination, which can be described as rejecting or ignoring an individual or group in a way that hinders a positive interpersonal relationship (Hitlan et al., 2006). Exclusion is often subtle, but can still have a great impact on those effected (Scott et al., 2015). While inclusion leads to many benefits, exclusion comes with many downsides. Working in an exclusionary environment has for example been associated with a stronger intent to leave the company and lower career satisfaction (Francis & Michielsens, 2021) as well as negative health outcomes such as stress and depression (Scott et al., 2015). The negative consequences highlight the importance of focusing on promoting inclusion at work.

How individuals deal with exclusion is highly dependent on how they experience the exclusion. For example Scott et al. (2015) study concluded that the way employees perceived the exclusion impacted their actions. More specifically, the study showed how employees who are generally happy and satisfied and aware of one's own abilities are more likely to attribute the exclusion to external factors such as colleagues being envious of them rather than the exclusion being dependent on them as an individual.

## 2.5 Inclusive leadership

In this chapter, I will present the previous research regarding the impact of leadership on inclusion as well as discuss the concept of *inclusive leadership*. Nembhard and Edmondson (2006) are considered to be one of the pioneers in the field of inclusive leadership. They define inclusive leadership or leader inclusiveness as “words and deeds exhibited by a leader or leaders that indicate an invitation and appreciation for others’ contributions (p.947). This type of definition has been adapted by other scholars too, such as Carmeli et al. (2010), Hirak et al. (2012) and Mitchell et al. (2015).

Inclusive leadership can also be defined as a set of behaviors that a leader has, which are aimed at fostering a sense of belonging among team members while also preserving their sense of uniqueness (Shore et al., 2011). Unlike other leadership approaches, inclusive leadership uniquely addresses the human need of belonging and recognition of uniqueness (Shore et al., 2011). This is an important skill for leaders to have when they want to create an inclusive workplace, since the feeling of inclusion is produced by the feeling of both belongingness and uniqueness (Shore et al., 2011). Leaders have a central role in the workplace, since they have a strong impact on the experience of employees in a work group, especially a diverse work group in which different values and perspectives may coexist (Shore et al., 2011).

Inclusive leadership can also be characterized as “behaviors that collectively facilitate all group member’s perceptions of belongingness to the work group and that encourage group members contributing their uniqueness to achieving positive group outcomes” (Randel et al., 2018, table 1, p.195). When comparing inclusive leadership to other known leadership styles, it can be noted that inclusive leaders, more so than others, are focused on creating a cohesive team where everyone feels included and appreciated for their own unique abilities. Transformational leaders are for example more focused on motivating and developing team members based on what the organization needs whereas inclusive leaders focus on accepting team members as they are and want them to contribute with their unique abilities and perspectives (Randel et al., 2018.)

Inclusive leadership is also characterized by fairness, open communication and showing sensitivity to follower’s needs (Carmeli et al., 2010).

Inclusive leadership has shown itself to be very beneficial to organizations. Previous studies show, for example, the significant role inclusive leadership has on employee performance and organizational citizenship behavior. For example, Panicker and colleagues (2018) studied how the perception of an inclusive workplace (including inclusive practices, climate and leadership) impacted organizational citizenship behavior (OCB). The results of the study show that inclusive leadership, together with inclusive practices and an inclusive climate were significantly associated with higher levels of OCB, meaning that inclusive environments and inclusive leadership create positive employee behaviors that benefit the organization. Inclusive leadership has also been shown to influence employees’ work engagement. Choi and colleagues' (2015) study show that leaders who demonstrate inclusiveness inspire employees to be more engaged in

their work. They explored this through two mediators: organizational commitment and employee creativity. Choi and colleagues propose that when leaders are inclusive, employees feel more committed and attached to the organization, making them more engaged at work. According to the results, inclusive leaders also inspire employees to be more creative, enhancing their engagement further. Previous studies also show how inclusive leadership can lower turnover rates in diverse workgroups (Nishii & Mayer, 2009) and how inclusive leadership lowers the perception of status differences, enhancing identification with the team and therefore improve team performance (Mitchell et al., 2015).

Inclusive leadership has additionally been related to psychological safety and been shown to reduce stress and anxiety and improve creativity. Ahmed and colleagues (2021) examined the effect inclusive leadership has on psychological safety and how this can reduce psychological distress during traumatic events. The study was conducted in India in 5 different hospitals, focusing on nurses' experiences. The results concluded that through the positive and supportive characteristics, inclusive leadership can improve the psychological safety of employees and therefore also reduce psychological distress and anxiety. Inclusive leadership has also been shown to foster creativity through creating a psychologically safe environment. The results from Carmeli and colleagues' (2010) study show that the way inclusive leaders value employees' input makes them more psychologically safe. This means that employees are not afraid of expressing themselves and are free to share their ideas, making them more willing to engage in creative tasks and improving workplace innovation.

## 3 The theoretical framework of the study

### 3.1 Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

This study uses Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as its theoretical framework as well as a qualitative research method. This chapter will present the theoretical background of IPA. How IPA has been used as a research method is explained further in chapter six.

IPA is an approach to qualitative and experiential research and was developed 30 years ago specifically for psychological studies (Smith & Osborn, 2015, p X). IPA was first presented in Jonathan Smith's article in the late 90's, published in *Psychology and Health* (Smith, 1996). The article argued that the field of psychology needed a new approach that would be able to capture both the experiential and qualitative but also still be in line with mainstream psychology. Much of the early work in IPA was in health psychology but has later been utilized in both clinical and counseling psychology as well as social and educational psychology (Smith et al., 2009, p. 9). IPA is not a completely new approach, and the theoretical background of IPA comes from three areas of the philosophy of knowledge: *Phenomenology*, *Hermeneutics* and *Idography* (Smith et al., 2009). In the following section these three areas will be presented and their influence on IPA will be explained.

According to Smith and colleagues (2009, p.11-20) phenomenology is a philosophical approach that focuses on the experiences of humans and aims to understand what it is like to be human. Smith and colleagues present four leading figures in phenomenological philosophy, whose work has influenced the development of IPA. Edmund Husserl is one of the key influences presented by Smith and colleagues. Husserl has contributed to the field of phenomenology by focusing on the importance of experiences and how individuals perceive these experiences. Smith and colleagues also present Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Martin Heidegger, and Jean-Paul Sartre as leading scholars in phenomenology. They have further developed Husserl's work, deepening the understanding that an individual's view and understanding of events and objects are shaped by the world around them. While our experiences are personal, they are also connected to the bigger social context and influenced by our relationships with others. The phenomenological background can be seen in IPA in the way IPA delves into participants' lived experiences and focuses on individual perceptions of events or objects, rather than aiming for an objective description of the event (Smith & Osborn, 2015). This commitment to exploring personal experiences makes IPA a valuable approach for research aiming to understand not only people's experiences but also how they perceive them.

The second major theoretical foundation of IPA that Smith and colleagues (2009, p.21-28) discuss is hermeneutics, which focuses on the theory of interpretation. The most well-known idea within the hermeneutic theory is the *hermeneutic circle*. Central to hermeneutics is the

concept of the hermeneutic circle, which describes the dynamic relationship between understanding individual parts and the whole. Essentially, to comprehend any specific part, one must also consider the entire context, and on the other hand, understanding the whole requires examining its individual parts. For IPA researchers, the hermeneutic circle is particularly useful, since it provides a way of thinking about the method. Other approaches in qualitative research tend to be described as a step-by-step process, and even though this is also the case for IPA, researchers frequently move back and forth between the different stages of analysis. In practice, the hermeneutic circle means that IPA researchers continually shift focus between the detailed aspects of the data and the broader context.

Idiography is the third major influence on the development of IPA that Smith et al. (2009, p. 29-32) present. Unlike many other psychological approaches, that aim to generalize across groups or populations, idiography focuses on the particular and the specific. This influence can be seen in IPA in two distinct ways. First, IPA is dedicated to the detail and depth of analysis. The commitment to idiography means that IPA studies delve deep into individual cases allowing researchers to gain a deep understanding of particular individual experiences. Secondly, the idiographic influence in IPA is evident in the way studies are conducted. IPA research is not concerned with making broad generalizations but rather with how specific experiences are understood by particular people within distinct contexts.

## 3.2 Research problem and questions

IPA is a well-suited approach for this study, since this study aims to explore (1) lived experiences of inclusion and exclusion in organizations and (2) how leaders and the work community contribute to shaping inclusion from the perspective of employees.

Even though one of the main focuses of this study is the leader's role in creating an inclusive workplace, this will be based on employee experience and not from the leader's perspective. One of the reasons why is because previous research has shown there to be a risk of decoupling between the company policy and what's done in practice (Mor Barak et al., 2022). To create an inclusive work environment, leaders' actions need to be aligned with the company policy.

Previous research indicated that the more leaders show with their actions the importance of inclusion, the stronger the inclusive climate is. A misalignment between what the policy is and how it's handled in practice has a negative effect on the inclusive climate (Mor Barak et al., 2022.) One important aspect of this policy-practice decoupling is how employees perceive the leader's actions. The leaders might view their actions as being aligned with the policies in place, but in practice might be very different. To study inclusion at the workplace it's important to hear about the employees' experiences. This might give an alternative view of the situation than focusing on how leaders see inclusion in the workplace. Another benefit of focusing the study on employees instead of leaders is that this might make employees feel more included and that their views and opinions are listened to.

This study aims to provide valuable knowledge to both organizations and the research field. Diversity and inclusion are important topics in today's globalized society, and more and more companies aim to be diverse and inclusive. By focusing on the employee experience, the study can bring something new to the research field and provide other organizations with new knowledge. The more specific research questions are:

1. How is inclusion and exclusion is experienced by employees?
2. How do employees experience the work community's role in creating an inclusive workplace?
3. How do employees experience their leader's role in creating an inclusive workplace?

## 6 Research method and data material

In this chapter I will present the research method, the data material, and the process of analysis. The study uses Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as its methodological approach, which will also be presented further in this chapter. This study uses a qualitative research method to explore the lived experiences of employees. Qualitative research methods such as participant observation and interviews, have since the 1980's been central methods in social sciences (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014, p. 27). It is not always easy to define what a qualitative research method

really is, but Alvesson & Sköldbberg (2017) points out that a key aspect of qualitative research is the focus on open empirical evidence that can be interpreted in many ways.

Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2017) also discuss the main differences between qualitative and quantitative research. In qualitative research, the researcher typically starts from the perspective of the study subject, while quantitative research often starts from the researcher's own ideas. According to Alvesson and Sköldbberg qualitative research can also be considered reflective research, where the researcher's presence and interpretation are central. The qualitative method is a well-suited approach for this study because the main focus is to interpret the data and make sense of these lived experiences and employee perceptions.

## 6.1 IPA as a methodological approach

This study does not only use Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as a theoretical framework, but also as a methodological approach. What is common in all IPA studies is the aim to explore the respondents view of the world and adopt a “insider”-view of the studied phenomena. The IPA researcher is interested in exploring how individuals perceive events rather than exploring the event itself (Smith & Osborn, 2015, Back & Berterö, 2019) and it is therefore not valuable to focus on whether the participant's description of a situation or experience is true or how close it is to reality. IPA is suitable for studies where the aim is to get in-depth knowledge about participant's personal experiences and how individuals perceive different situations (Back & Berterö, 2019) making it a well-suited approach for this study.

Previously IPA has been utilized in various research topics. For example, Arroll and Senior (2008) used IPA to explore patients' experiences with chronic fatigue syndrome and Hunt and Smith (2004) studied care takers' experiences with stroke survivors. Another research topic, where IPA has been utilized is sex and sexuality. Some examples being Jarman's, Walsh's and De Lacey's (2005) study about HIV positive women's experiences of partner relationships and Lavie and Willig's (2005) analysis of women's experiences with inorgasmia. IPA has also been used in studies regarding psychological stress, such as Howes and colleague's study (2005) about the experiences of women with a traumatic brain injury. Identity is also a research topic that has been explored in IPA studies, such as the impact of migration on identity (Timotijevic &

Breakwell, 2000) or how health behavior among young men impacts their perception of masculinity and identity (de Visser & Smith, 2007; de Visser & Smith, 2006). More recently, IPA has been used for example in studies about different groups' experiences during COVID-19 (McGlinchey et al., 2021; O'Sullivan et al., 2021; Suhail et al., 2021), young adult's experiences of waiting lists within mental health services (Punton et al., 2022) and the experiences of autistic medical students (Shaw et al., 2023). IPA has also gained popularity among students' thesis work at the University of Helsinki and has been used in studies about experiences of remote work during Covid (Hallikas, 2022), grief and caregiving (Helminen, 2024) and problematic use of social media (Nironen, 2024).

## 6.2 The qualitative research interview

The data for this study has been collected with qualitative, semi-structured interviews, as recommended in the IPA method (Smith & Osborn, 2015). In this chapter I will go into more detail about the background of qualitative interviews. According to Kvale and Brinkmann (2014, p.17) the qualitative interview aims to understand the world from the participant's perspective and to develop meaning from their experiences, instead of using scientific explanations. It is considered a professional conversation with a clear structure and aim (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014, p. 18). Kvale and Brinkmann (2014, p.33-35) describe qualitative interviews as an ability, since it is based on the interviewer's capabilities and something the researcher can practice. Interviews can also be seen as a social, knowledge-producing activity. During the interview, the interviewer and the participant form new knowledge through their relationship. Last, but not least, qualitative interviews can be seen as a social practice, due to the interview being embedded in a historical and social context. The relationship between the interviewer and the participant is often connected within a broader sociopolitical context.

Semi-structured interviews are a type of qualitative interview that has a particular aim but have a certain amount of flexibility. As the name describes, the interviews are half structured, meaning that they are not built to be open discussion, nor are they fully structured questionnaire (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014, p. 45). According to Kvale and Brinkmann (2014, p. 45-50) there are some

typical characteristics for a semi-structured interview. First, the interview aims to understand the participants' lived world and understand the meaning of central themes in this world. Semi-structured interviews are qualitative in nature, meaning that they focus on nuanced descriptions of the participants' experiences instead of making numerical conclusions. The interviews also focus on descriptions of specific experiences rather than general opinions. The interviewer approaches the interview with an open mind instead of focusing on previous categories or ways of interpreting.

Semi-structured interviews have a specific focus in mind, but do not use strictly structured questions. The interviewer uses open questions instead, allowing the participant to focus on topics that are meaningful for them. It is also important to note that the interview is a social situation where both parties influence one another. The interviewer needs to take into consideration the participant's boundaries and be able to cope with the dynamics in the interview. This way the interviewer can ensure a positive experience for the participant. Although there is a common understanding between both parts, the interview should not be considered a conversation between two equals. The interview is a professional conversation where the interviewer has a position of power, deciding on the topic and structure of the discussion (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014, p.51).

Semi-structured interviews are a great way to gather the data for this study since it aligns well with the aim of the study. The goal of semi-structured interviews is to understand participants lived world, therefore fitting perfectly with the study aim of exploring employee's lived experiences of inclusion and exclusion in the organization and how they view leaders' and the work community's role in shaping inclusion.

## 6.4 Data material

The data used for this study consists of six (6) transcribed semi-structured interviews with employees working for the same company in Finland<sup>1</sup>. I chose to conduct six interviews, since IPA recommends using a smaller sample size in order to get an in-depth understanding of the phenomena studied, instead of broader data that can be generalized (Smith & Osborn, 2015). The data will be presented in more detail in the following sections.

The study was conducted in a Finnish company in the STEM-field (short for science, technology, engineering and mathematics). More specifically, the company operates in the technology industry and within electricity. According to Technology Industries of Finland (2024), the technology industry has 334 753 employees in Finland of which 43 144 work within the electrical industry (Teknologiateollisuus ry, 2023). The industry is known for being male dominated, with statistics showing that around 77 % of employees in the industry are men, while only 23 % are women. Within the electricity industry the men conclude 72 % of the employees, while the amount of women is 28 % (Teknologiateollisuus ry, 2024b). In a comparison made by the Technology Industry of Finland (2021) the results show that the amount of women is also lower compared to other fields of work. The comparison was made across various work tasks, such as directors, specialists, customer service, sales, shipping and manufacturing. The results conclude that the number of women in various positions in other fields of work is 54 %, while the same is only 22 % in the technology industry. Employees of different nationalities are also a minority in the industry. According to the Technology Industry of Finland (2021a) only around 7 % of employees in the electricity industry are of a different nationality than Finnish. The amount has however increased over the years, being only 4 % in 2017. (Teknologiateollisuus ry, 2021a). On their webpage the company in question describes themselves as an international technology company and a family business that creates sustainable solutions for electricity distribution with a global team of 800 experts in 13 countries.

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<sup>1</sup> The company was my employer

For my sample selection I aimed to recruit respondents who worked at the company in Finland and belonged to a minority. In my selection I chose not to focus on a specific minority group, but rather aimed at gathering a broad group of people. The respondents were recruited in two ways: either by contacting the person directly or by asking leaders to suggest people from their team. When contacting leaders, I explained the aim of my study and asked them to suggest employees who might be interested in partaking in an interview. I also clarified that I can then contact the possible respondents and explain the study in more detail. From the leaders I contacted, I received four suggestions on employees I should get in touch with. Three of these agreed to be interviewed, while one didn't respond to the request. In addition to this I also contacted three employees myself. Being employed at the company myself, I had a good understanding of whom to contact for the interviews and who might be interested in participating. All three respondents I contacted agreed to participate. I reached out to respondents by sending them an email or a message in Microsoft Teams. In this message I explained the aim of the study as well as what data is collected and how it is going to be stored. Once the respondent agreed to participate in the study, I scheduled the interview accordingly. Before each interview I also sent a consent form (Attachment 2) for the respondents to read through and sign, allowing me to get written consent.

The interviews were conducted in the summer of 2024 either face-to-face or online via Microsoft Teams, depending on the respondents' preferences. When meeting with the respondents, I always started with some casual small talk to make the respondent comfortable, which is also recommended by Smith and Osborn (2015). After that I explained the consent form I had sent earlier, giving respondents the possibility to ask questions about the form. This process allowed me to get both written and oral consent before starting the interview. In the beginning I also explained how the structure of the interview will be: I will ask questions, and they are allowed to answer them in any way they want. I assured the respondents that there are no right or wrong answers and that they can ask questions during the interview. I also made sure they understood that participating in the interview is completely voluntary and that if they at any point want to interrupt the interview or they do not want to answer a question they are allowed to do so.

The interviews followed an interview guide with 48 questions (attachment 1), which included follow-up questions that could be asked if the discussion didn't naturally cover them. To test out the interview guide I conducted a pilot interview. This interview is not included in the final 6

interviews nor has its results been used in the analysis. After the pilot interview I adjusted some of the questions which led to the final interview guide used in the study. Since the interviews were semi-structured it allowed me to have flexibility to adapt the questions to the respondent's answers, which meant that not all the questions listed in the interview guide were asked by all the respondents.

The interview questions were designed to be open-ended, allowing the respondents to answer in a way that was meaningful for them. The questions were divided into five themes: (1) Understanding DEI, (2) Experiences of inclusion and exclusion, (3) Understandings of an inclusive culture, (4) Understandings of leader's contribution to inclusion as well as (5) Understandings of employees' contribution to inclusion. In the beginning the respondents were also asked some background questions, for example regarding their previous work experience, to get the discussion going. These background questions were not the focus of the analysis but could give context to some of the answers. As recommended by Smith and Osborn (2015) I focused on asking one question at a time and using simple follow up questions such as "Can you tell me more about that?" to avoid making the respondent feel overwhelmed. Interviews were conducted in either English or Finnish, depending on the respondent's preferred language and took around 1-1,5 hours.

In IPA studies it is recommended to both record and transcribe interviews to be able to capture all the nuances in the discussion (Smith & Osborn, 2015). I recorded the interviews with the voice memo functionality on iPhone. Directly after the interview I moved the recording to my University of Helsinki OneDrive and deleted it from my phone. I then transcribed the interview using Microsoft Word. In the transcription I included pauses, laughs and false starts as recommended for IPA studies (Smith & Osborn, 2015). The transcription was made in the spoken language, but for the reporting of the results the quotations have all been translated to English with the help of DeepL. I corrected the translations when needed. All the transcriptions were also saved in the University of Helsinki's OneDrive.

The participants in this study are between the ages of 40-50 and consist of two men and four women. The ages have been rounded up to ensure the anonymity of participants. All participants have worked at the company for at least 3 years, with some having even longer careers. The respondents all work in different teams and function at the company and have various work tasks

and responsibilities. The participants represent about half of the company's functions. Everyone comes from different educational backgrounds, and their previous work experience also differs from one another. The respondents all felt that they belonged to a minority group, whether it had to do with gender, nationality, or sexual orientation.

To achieve an in-depth knowledge about the topic, IPA studies often aim to get a homogeneous sample (Smith & Osborn, 2015). Homogeneity in IPA studies can sometimes be achieved by having participants with similar characteristics such as socio-economic background, age, gender, education but it can also be related to the researched topic (Smith & Osborn, 2015). Even though the group of respondents in this study varies in a lot of ways, they have all experienced inclusion at work. Whether or not participants had experienced inclusion was initially checked during the recruitment phase. When contacting possible participants, I explained the aim of the study and that I'm interested in hearing about employees' experiences and thoughts regarding this topic. The respondents were also asked about their experiences during the interview, which confirmed that they all have had experiences of inclusion at work.

## 6.5 Analysis of data

This study uses an inductive approach to analyze the data. This means that there was no specific theory driving the analysis like it is in the deductive approach. Instead, conclusions were drawn based on the material that was gathered (Fejes & Thornberg, 2019). For the analysis I used Smith and Osborn's (2015) step-by-step guide on IPA analysis. Since qualitative analysis is always a personal process, Smith and Osborn also point out that their guide should not be viewed as a prescriptive methodology, but rather a suggestion on a way of working. Every researcher can adapt the guide to suit their study's needs. Even though I have followed the step-by-step guide in quite detail, there are some things that are not mentioned by Smith and Osborn but that I have decided to focus on, such as listening to the audio recordings during the initial stages of analysis.

To analyze my data, I utilized ATLAS.ti, which is a software specifically designed for qualitative analysis. I analyzed all the interview transcripts separately before making generalizations of the gathered data. This also goes along with IPA's way of moving between

looking at details and looking at the whole (Smith & Osborn, 2015). By analyzing each transcript separately, you get a more in-depth understanding of the participant's lived experience before comparing it to the others. In the following sections I will go through the different steps of analysis in more detail.

***Step 1: Familiarizing yourself with the data.*** The first stage in the analysis was familiarizing myself with the data. In this study this meant reading through interview transcripts and listening to audio recordings. After this I started writing down initial comments in a marginal of the transcripts. These comments did not follow a specific structure, they were just things that popped up when reading through the material. Some examples of the comments I wrote in the marginal are: "Company commitment is important", "Management's commitment" and "A lot of previous experience with working in a diverse team".

***Step 2: Identifying emerging themes.*** After the initial familiarization I started identifying emerging themes in the transcripts and creating codes for these themes. I used ATLAS.ti to create the codes. I created the initial codes based on notions in the transcript that were relevant for my research questions. In this initial coding phase, my aim was to create codes that I can easily connect to what the participant actually said. Therefore, I named most of the initial codes based on what was said in the sentence, for example "Can't be open about certain things, afraid of what others might say". Even though this made the codes quite long, I felt it was easier to manage them when they were named specifically, since it gave the codes more context. If I had named a code "Communication" instead of "Communication about what happens in the company creates a sense of inclusion" the name of the code would not give me any type of indication of how this was brought up in the interview. By matching the code name to what was said I was also able to ensure that I portrayed the participant's meanings and the way they spoke correctly instead of focusing too much on my own interpretation. I also used shorter and more concise code names such as "Feeling alone" or "Management's key role". These were used when the sentence itself was quite straightforward and naming a code based on the sentence wouldn't bring any additional value to the analysis.

After the initial coding each interview transcript had around 60 codes. To make sure I hadn't missed any relevant information, I started going through the transcripts again. I read each transcript separately and added new codes as well as edited existing ones when needed. During

this process I also noticed that I had some codes that captured the same thing but had different names. These types of codes I combined to avoid any overlapping. At the end of the second review the number of codes remained approximately the same.

***Step 3: Creating clusters of themes.*** When the initial coding was done, I started creating clusters of themes. I did this by downloading all the quotations and codes I had made in ATLAS.ti as an Excel-file. The original file had 3 columns: One for the code I had created, one for the quote it was connected to and one for the comments I had made during the initial coding. The comments were often aimed at explaining the quote or code in more detail or to help me with the translations later. For example, I had named a code “Concrete actions, not just empty words” and added a comment explaining this further: “It’s important to show the importance through concrete actions, not just words because we have to have this written somewhere”. This way I could also ensure that the short code names didn’t take away from what the respondent had actually said during the interview.

To be able to filter out the codes for each interview and analyze them separately, I added filters to each column. I then proceeded to look over the interviews one by one and started creating groups of themes. I did this by copy-pasting codes into their own clusters. This created a good overview of the different groups of themes and made it easy to move the codes from one group to another. In the end, each group included multiple codes that had some kind of common themes. I named the groups of themes to match the content as closely as possible. For example, I grouped codes that had to do with how leaders are considered role models in creating inclusion and named the group “The leader as the role model”. I repeated this process for all 6 interviews.

***Step 4: Creating a table of themes.*** After clustering the codes to different groups, I started to create tables for each group. As recommended by Smith and Osborn (2015) I created tables for each group where the codes were matched with a quotation (for example, see Table 1 and 2) This way I could ensure that the codes are still in line with the transcription. I also kept the whole transcription open to make sure that I didn’t miss the whole context. In this phase of the analysis, I noticed that some of the names I had initially used for the codes did not capture the theme properly. In these cases, I changed the names to better suit the themes they represented. When creating the tables I also identified new groups of themes. For example, I had initially created a group of themes called “Management’s key role” but with closer inspection I noticed that the

group included subthemes that were referring to both management’s role as the decision maker as well as their responsibility as a role model. This led me to separate the initial group into two new groups of themes. I repeated this process for each interview. In the end, each interview had 11-12 main themes and around 30-40 subthemes.

<b>How the feeling of inclusion affects work</b>	
Feeling support	<i>Of course, it is a big factor in the fact that there is no feeling of being alone at any point, if there is something negative or otherwise adversity.</i>
Work is enjoyable	<i>On a general level, it's nice to go to work.</i>
Positive atmosphere at work	<i>Hmmm... Some joint work performance so I would not say that it is as if it is just for it but it is just a general, overall positive feeling that it is around.</i>
Comfortable sharing opinions	<i>and I can criticise the decision if I feel like it</i>
Open dialogue about improvement areas	<i>I think it's going quite well and here are the reasons why I think it's not going well and here's maybe a suggestion on how to do it differently.</i>

Table 1: Table of themes from Helena’s interview transcript

<b>Involving employees in decision-making</b>	
Value employee input	<i>Well, I think it's important that every employee can....ehm..participate and develop something in the company...</i>
Constructive problem-solving together	<i>Another example is just that it was quite a challenging time and there have been negotiations and everything, but on the other hand they were offered to suggest ways to save money and suggestions and ideas and I think it's quite constructive and positive trend.</i>
Having an outlet	<i>Is it even Finnish to channel... but therefore to channel one's own energy in that constructive and positive direction</i>
Sense of responsibility and impact	<i>and also to take the responsibility for yourself, that how, how we all can influence the situation and possible solution of the company..ehm..</i>
Including employees creates a sense of authority	<i>also to involve people in the process, so that it doesn't feel like the big guys are deciding what's going to happen, that we don't have the power or even an image or no, there's no concrete strategy or even a strategy for building that strategy,</i>

Table 2: Table of themes from Leo’s interview transcript

**Step 5: Creating an overview of themes:** After analyzing each interview I started to look at the similarities and differences in the interviews to get an overview of the main themes. This required me to prioritize the data, picking out the most relevant themes and information, which was quite challenging. I started the process by picking out similar themes that stood out in most

of the interviews. After that I started to pick out themes that are unique for each interview to get an overview of the similarities and differences between the interviews. This way I was able to get an understanding of what the themes are in the bigger context of this study, going back to the way IPA goes from focusing on small details to comparing it to the whole (Smith & Osborn, 2015). These themes will be presented in the results.

## 6.6 Research ethics

In this chapter the ethical aspects of the study are presented. When you are doing qualitative research it's important to consider ethics in all stages of the study, especially when it's a sensitive topic such as diversity and inclusion.

When planning and conducting my research I followed the ethical principles made by the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (TENK). One important aspect is that participants are made aware of the content of the study and what their participation entails. According to TENK (2019), participants have the right to participate voluntarily and withdraw their consent in the research at any time. The participants also have the right to receive information on the content and aim of the research as well as the processing of personal data. During the recruitment process I explained both the aim of the study and how data would be gathered and saved. Once the participant agreed to participate in an interview, I shared a consent form with the respondents (Attachment 2). In the consent form the aim of the study was explained once again as well as what data is being gathered and how it's saved. I also instructed the respondents to be in contact with me if any questions occurred. The respondents were then asked to sign the consent form, allowing me to get written consent for their participation.

The interviews were conducted face-to-face or via a Teams call, depending on the participant's preferences. Before starting the interview, I explained the consent form once again and allowed participants to ask questions, if they had any. Following TENK's guidelines (2019) I also explained that participating in the interview is completely optional and that they can withdraw their consent of participating at any point in time. I also let the participants know that they do not have to answer questions they are not comfortable with. If they wanted to skip over a question,

they were free to do so. All interviews were recorded, which was also explained to the participants before starting the interview.

According to TENK's guidelines (2019) the processing of research data that contains personal information must be planned, responsible and in accordance with the law. The planning must also include consideration of possible risks to the participants. In this case, I wanted to ensure that all the gathered material can be stored somewhere safely, without external access. Since the University of Helsinki's OneDrive is data protected and designed for research purposes, I decided to store all recorded material on my account in OneDrive. The material included the video and audio recordings from the interviews, the signed consent forms as well as the written transcripts. This information was also included in the consent form and explained to the participants before the interview started. Materials will also be deleted 6 months after this thesis work has been approved, which was also explained to the participants.

Another important aspect of doing a study with human participants is the protection of privacy. According to TENK (2019) one should not publish data from which the participants can be identified. I took this into account during the whole process of collecting, storing and analyzing the data. To ensure the anonymity of respondents, no sensitive information was gathered during the interview and when writing the transcriptions, I used pseudonyms instead of the respondent's real name. I didn't include any other names that might have come up during the interview, for example when a respondent was explaining a situation with their colleague or leader. This way I could further ensure that the respondents cannot be identified from their answers. All transcriptions were written in the spoken language, but the citations were later translated into English for reporting the results. As recommended by TENK, I explained this whole process to the respondents before the interview, making sure they are well-aware of what information is gathered and how it's processed.

It is also important to take into consideration your own role as a researcher and make sure that the respondent is aware of this role. According to the TENK guidelines (2019), the participants have the right to be aware that they are participating in a research. This is especially important to bring up in cases where the respondent can have another relationship with the researcher. Since I work at the same company as the respondents it was important to clarify what my role is in this situation. Before the interview I explained that I am doing this study as part of my master's

studies and that I'm here as a researcher and interviewer, not as an HR representative for the company. Even though the results of my study will be used for HR development work at the company, it was important to clarify what my role is. The respondents were also made aware that the results will be utilized at the company. Before starting the interview, I also explained that the structure of the interview will be me asking questions, to which they can answer in whatever way they want, instead of it being a discussion between an employee and HR.

## 7 Results

In this chapter I will present the results of my analysis. I have divided the results into separate chapters, each presenting the main themes that came up in the interviews. The first subchapter reports results about how employees view inclusion at work, exploring various contributing aspects as well as possible outcomes of inclusion. The second subchapter presents reports on how employees have experienced exclusion including how they have dealt with feelings of exclusion and their reflections on the outcomes of exclusion. The last subchapter includes respondents' views and experiences of the role of leadership in creating inclusion and what roles respondents have assigned to leaders.

### 7.1 Inclusion at work

All the respondents had experienced inclusion at work and described the concept of inclusion in similar ways. For example, inclusion was often explained as actions that promote the participation and involvement of employees as well as the feeling of being a part of something. Four of the interviewees explained:

*“All employees are included in the decision-making. Instead of just being the outcome of decisions.”* (Helena)

*“Inclusion, it’s like the feeling that you are part of something. It doesn’t have to be on the top or in the middle, just that you play your role.” (David)*

*“Well that no one is left out....that we are genuinely interested that everyone belongs to this group of ours.” (Sanna)*

*“It’s like employee inclusion or involvement... so with work it’s no longer that... That it is the leader who gives the orders, but that we work together...more like this.” (Mari)*

The quotes show that respondents focus on not only the actions that promote inclusiveness e.g. decision-making, showing interest and collaboration, but also how it makes employees feel. If everyone is actively included in the work environment this will also make them feel more like a part of the community. The descriptions also indicate that respondents have a need to belong and emphasize the importance of cooperation and shaping the work together with others.

When talking about actions that have made the respondents feel included, the interviewees often describe small acts of kindness that show that their colleagues care about them. Helena talked about a time when her colleague remembered that she was vegetarian and organized food for her for an event:

*“The employee info, that without me even having to remind them, [person’s name] has got vegetarian food there for me. That sort of thing. It was small, but very noticeable, because I usually go to every place that I have to have my own stuff with me... The fact that someone remembers it without having to say so is always... a very big positive surprise.” (Helena)*

Sanna and Mari also reported similar instances where the small acts of kindness from colleagues had made them feel more included and as part of something bigger. This included, for example, ordering a bouquet of flowers or going to the pharmacy.

*“I had a really challenging situation in my personal life and I had to be away from work....and then my colleagues, they had ordered a flower delivery for me to my home with their good luck wishes, like that kind of little things... makes me feel that I am like part of the team and they think of me.” (Mari)*

*“Colleagues wrote to ask if there is anything they can do to help me? Do they need to go to the shop for me? And my co-workers went to the pharmacy to get us (respondent and her family) some painkillers while we were in quarantine, so it does show in my everyday life that I am part of something bigger. My work community is great.”* (Sanna)

The experiences of Helena, Mari and Sanna all show how even small actions can have an impact on the bigger picture. Even though it might seem simple to order food for a vegetarian or ordering flowers, the common theme in all these instances was how this made the recipient feel. All three respondents seem to have felt like they were noticed and seen by their colleagues, making them feel as though they are a part of the team and that their colleagues care about them.

Another thing that had made employees feel more included was how much they were able to voice their opinions and give feedback. Leo for example talks about how he has represented the function he works in, in the company’s “*Council*” that is a cooperative forum that allows employees to give feedback and be a part of the decisions that are made at the company.

*“Well I think it's important that every employee can....ehm..contribute and develop something in the company...ehm... For example, I've been able to..represent in the [company] Council...ehm... [the function] on my behalf”.*  
(Leo)

Mari also talked about how they aim at including employees and getting their input on evaluations done at the workplace. Employees have given good feedback and appreciate that they have had the opportunity to participate and voice their opinions on things.

*“When we've organized those [evaluations], we've always gone along with the idea that we always include employees, that it's not just...the leaders and team leaders that go through it with each other, but that we include the employees... And we have received feedback that they have... been much more interesting and they have liked the fact that they have got to participate in them.”* (Mari)

Sanna on the other hand talked about a time when her colleague had taken further steps in a project she had been involved in and then asked for her to give her input as well. This made her

feel good as her colleague appreciated her opinion as well. She also pointed out how this makes you feel a part of the community:

*“They asked afterwards if I have something to add and I felt good that they asked afterwards... I just put that there is nothing else to add that well..... it feels good that they even let me know that something had happened.”(Sanna)*

*“We all know all sorts of things together, so yes, it's because when you are sought and asked for information and invited to meetings, you are part of the... community.” (Sanna)*

Leo also brought up a time when employees were encouraged to be involved in coming up ways to save money and resources when the company faced more difficult times. This was something he considered to be especially significant, because it allowed employees to play a valuable role in the decision-making process.

*“When there was a pretty challenging time and there have been negotiations and everything, but on the other hand it was possible to suggest ways to save money and give suggestions and ideas and I think it's a pretty constructive and positive direction, even though it's critical and pretty challenging, also psychologically for many but....but I think it's good that I can get a little bit like....is it even in Finnish to “channel”... but like to channel your own energy in a constructive and positive direction and also to take responsibility for yourself, that how, how we can all influence the situation and possible solution of the company. In the long... run.”*  
(Leo)

Even though there are some differences in these examples, there is a common theme of wanting to feel valued and seen by your work community. It seems like the respondents consider it important to be able to give feedback and input on things, because this makes you feel important and as though you are a part of something bigger.

### 7.1.1 The shaping of inclusion

Most of the respondents reported that in their experience, one of the main contributors to the feeling of inclusion is the impact that personal attitudes have on shaping the work environment and therefore also the feeling of inclusion. This included reflections on how attitude towards, for example, inclusion impacts your actions as well as how your previous experiences and personal beliefs shape the way you interpret things. The interviewees claimed:

*“Firstly, our attitude has an effect too. The employee [unclear speech] like to do the job they do. I think that’s always the beginning... then, then it all works out. Little by little.”* (Marina)

*“Perhaps it is more that the attitude of individuals can be like that (negative towards inclusion).....And as I’ve noticed..... in my own personal circle of people who have a really negative attitude to everything just.. Pride days and pride month and all this kind of stuff and are really absolute in that there is only a man and a woman and everyone else needs therapy [laughter] So..... that it is perhaps in my opinion the bigger (issue)... that if it is like personally people think that or their attitude is like that.”* (Mari)

*“So you can make the best of creating a very, let’s say the most positive atmosphere that you can create. People can somehow agree on that or have a minimum set of clear rules. If those needs to be pointed out so that nobody feels at least a direct.....Threat or particularly fundamental uncomfortable thing. But no one can, let’s say.....Define too much how you feel on the inside about, about things. About your background, your trauma, so a lot of things has to do on how you interpret.”* (David)

*“That in that sense.....own responsibility and own role and own...maybe hope and motivation... influences it and also your own beliefs.... They can kind of open*

*doors or limit ....yourself.... That it is like....maybe.... According to the person's nature.” (Leo)*

Another reported factor that contributes to the feeling of inclusion is the people around you. A few respondents reported how they felt that the atmosphere is created by employees and how trusting the people around you is an important factor in creating inclusion.

*“The work environment is made by the workers, they have 100 % responsibility of the atmosphere.” (David)*

*"I think the most important thing is the people you work with and how it works ...and the trust that the other person will do their part or that you are trusted... that you are the one who gets the job done and.... and maybe it is the [company name] Trust capital. It's what we always talk about in the team, that it's quite important in the end.” (Mari)*

Sanna also talked about how the environment is formed together and how everyone plays their part in it. By including employees when creating the work culture, it can also improve the employee's commitment:

*“It's not up to a small group of one or two people to make it work. And if, for example, HR would always be the one who does all this kind of work and does not include others, then it is someone else who has developed something and then you are not part of it.... It is always better that people can be part of the culture you're trying to develop.” (Sanna)*

These quotes illustrate that respondents put a lot of emphasis on the people in the work community and reflect on how personal attitudes and experiences influence both your actions and how you interpret things. There is a common theme of shared responsibility, meaning that employees seem to think that the environment is shaped together, and everyone has a role to play. The respondents also seem to understand that everyone is different, and this may have an impact on how inclusion is shaped and understood, giving the impression that the respondents are themselves quite adaptive and understanding of others.

Shared activities and common events were things that respondents felt were something concrete that had a great impact on how inclusion is shaped at work. Here respondents also pointed out that they appreciated it when they were able to join the planning of events, ensuring that everyone can find something they would like to participate in. This could include activities both outside of work as well as things related to work, for example team meetings.

*"Over the past year, we have really taken hold of community events in our work environment, especially because our person responsible for them started last fall and has done an excellent job to ensure that the events cover as wide of a group as possible. It's not just like, 'okay, I like sports, so everyone should do this, and if you don't like it, too bad.'" (Helena)*

*"Well, we have this crossfit group. And at some point I talked with my mother, that yes, we have this crossfit and then we do rowing and then we got this mobility measurements and my mother said that you guys do all kinds of fun things like that for health and well-being....and we do winter swimming with my colleagues, and I feel that I really belong, that they are interested that I am there. That makes me feel good." (Sanna)*

*"Well..... [colleague's name] always organizes these.... What we do together now is like, that they always send to everyone and... (asks) what time it would be more suitable so they give like always options and asks that you vote.... So then you are involved in that and that I can influence." (Sanna)*

*"Once a month, if you have a general meeting, where your own work, your own department can be discussed." (Marina)*

This shows that respondents appreciate a sense of community and feel that this is achieved when you spend time with your coworkers. They also seem to appreciate being able to voice their opinion whether it be organizing events or in a team meeting, which also gives them a sense of involvement and inclusion.

Another issue that was raised by respondents was how committed the company is to create inclusion and how this is discussed in the company. Respondents valued that the aim for

inclusion is a part of the company values and mission and that this is emphasized at the company through concrete actions and not just stated in a slogan.

*“But for example, if I were to apply for a new job now... theoretically for a new position, these things are quite important to me. During the interview, it is crucial to emphasize how seriously the company takes them and whether it is part of the company's strategy. And of course, it would be good to know if the company talks about these things... Many times these issues are mentioned or used theoretically on some website description, constructing a fake identity for the organization. But the reality in real life within the company is quite different. In my opinion, it is very important that it's not an idealistic utopia, but a place where inclusivity, diversity, and international work are discussed and developed accordingly.”*

(Leo)

*“One way to do it (create an inclusive environment), I would say clear actions, like not just one more color in the rainbow flag....If I read “People first” in a slogan, but then I feel that the last thing they would care about is the people.”*

(David)

Both Leo's and David's encounters claim that when a company is truly committed to enhancing inclusion and this is shown through concrete actions, it makes it seem more genuine to employees. Both respondents' places great emphasis on this, and see it as something important when you want to create an inclusive environment.

### 7.1.2 The importance of inclusion

The respondents reported different types of outcomes that might come from feeling included at work. One of the main things that came up was how the feeling of inclusion increases your motivation at work. This was also considered to enhance your performance at work. The respondents talked about how being noticed and when feeling part of something bigger, they start to care more and put in more effort. This can also be because they feel like what you are doing also affects others.

*“Well, it makes it nice, that you put in a bit more effort, that I really want to do something for my colleagues, that if someone is waiting for my work... for me to provide them with what they need, then I do my best to... give them what they've asked for and on time.” (Sanna)*

*“Well, of course it does. It does.... [unclear speech] it does and when you can and it's noticed that you can. So it is. Well you have attention.... then you put in more effort you could say.” (Marina)*

*“And then the results of the work are better and the motivation is better and so is the desire to work and the fact that I want to do my job really well because then we all benefit from the fact that these things are done well.... so that's also what happens then.” (Mari)*

Helena also pointed out that feeling included created a positive atmosphere at work, making it enjoyable to come to work every day. When she feels like she is a part of the team she works with, she also does not feel alone, especially when facing obstacles or issues.

*“Of course, it's a big factor in not feeling alone at any point, if something negative or otherwise challenging comes along. On a general level, the fact that it is nice to go to work.” (Helena)*

Inclusion was also reported to create a psychologically safe environment where employees are not afraid to voice their opinions. Feeling included makes employees feel like they have a supportive atmosphere around them, making them more comfortable with leaning on colleagues when they need support.

*“So that if I have to do something, I know who I can ask and I know that I can get help if necessary and I can criticize the decision if I feel like it. I think that it's going fine and here are the reasons why I think it's not going well and here is perhaps a suggestion on how to do it differently.” (Helena)*

*“Openness is in my opinion (important for creating an inclusive environment).... it's when..... everyone has the courage and is able to be themselves and say if*

*something is not right.....or if there is a situation that needs to be corrected.. ”*

(Mari)

Being included also allowed the interviewees you to play their part in the organization, reminding them that they are an asset to the company. Both David and Leo discussed how inclusion also leads to a sense of responsibility and an understanding of your own impact on the company. This led them to feeling useful and can also increase their motivation.

*“ (Inclusion) would be I think something like you’re being part of something. And at work it means that you have common goals or projects or cases and you are aware of your responsibility, your voice is heard, your actions have been taken into account. And you are like, let’s say being useful, being part of something.”*

(David)

*“But for example, just that I get to do something else not just...in my bubble... that I can work on something bigger. Projects can be a good example, being part of the development projects and now there is [example of ongoing project where Leo is involved], that kind of....ehm... Good kind of reminder for employees that our work is important. And we know....ehm... The organization and how everyone contributes to our...for example long supply chain or some process and it’s good also.....to raise employees....ehm...to that level and remind (them) of their own role and influence and motivate also, also to create and and, and bring new ideas.” (Leo)*

In general, the respondents seem to think the feeling inclusion is something valuable not only for the individual but for the company as well. Making employees feel included seemed to have an impact on how motivated the employees are, making them go that extra mile to achieve a good outcome. It also impacted their overall well-being at work and helped them realize their own role and make them feel seen and valued as a part of the community.

In the following chapter, I will present results regarding respondents’ experiences of exclusion. The chapter will also present what respondents reflected on about the possible outcomes of exclusion as well as how they dealt with the feelings of exclusion.

## 7.2 Experiences of exclusion

There were instances where the respondents felt excluded, which will be presented in this chapter. Sanna for example talked about how she sometimes is left out of project meetings, where she feels she could bring additional value with her own knowledge. In the quote below, Sanna states that even though her colleague tried to keep her in the loop by explaining what was discussed in the meeting, the experience still left her feeling like her input was not needed nor valued.

*“It's not always that if [colleague's name] starts to tell me what was said at the meeting, they filter it through their own thoughts and how they understand things. It's not necessarily so that I look at it with the same eyes. So that's why it's good to be involved. At the time I felt a bit like....that I was just doing my work, that even though I had this education and work experience behind me, it wasn't cared about”. (Sanna)*

Sanna brings up a valuable point of her not “looking at it with the same eyes”, emphasizing that it is beneficial to have people with different backgrounds in the meetings, since they can come up with valuable new insights. Sanna also feels as though her colleagues did not notice or consider her knowledge and expertise. This indicates that it is important for Sanna that her colleagues pay attention to her and allow her to play a part in the team. She considers it important that her colleagues notice her, because when the team did not invite her to the project meeting, it left her feeling underappreciated and excluded from the team.

Mari also described a similar situation, where the other employees in her team are a part of another smaller team as well, making her at times feel alone and excluded.

*“The first time when they had the [team name] meeting, then I realized that I was the only one from our team who was not part of [team name]. And yeah, but I know that I have no reason why I should be, but then it became a bit like that, that everyone else except me [laughter].” (Mari)*

It seems like Mari has accepted the fact that her role does not require her to be a part of this team, stating that “I know that I have no reason why I should be”, which illustrates that she

downplays her experience. Her choice of words, like “they had” and “everyone else except me” also indicates that Mari perceives there to be a separation within the team. Not being a part of this other team still bothers her, because her colleagues have something in common that she is not a part of. This can be interpreted as Mari valuing her team and even though she can laugh at the matter and take this quite lightheartedly it still isn’t the nicest feeling being the only one left out of the meetings.

In contrast to Sanna’s and Mari’s experiences of exclusion, Helena talked about instances where she felt excluded on a more personal level, feeling as though she cannot fully be herself around her coworkers. Knowing how they might feel about certain things has made her more closed off and afraid to share personal details. She reports how this not only takes up a lot of time, but also consumes a lot of energy.

*“Well, I know which of my colleagues are married to a woman or married to someone of the opposite sex or who has, who has kids and what their names are and how old they are and what they're up to. But at the same time, I think that if I happened to be with a woman at the moment, I wouldn't immediately be as excited about sharing these things. I should always think about who's here? Will there be nasty comments? I know it's very small, but in the long run it takes time. And a lot of energy to prepare for it.....for the fact that it's just going to be negative.”*

(Helena)

The way Helena expresses how she is prepared to receive “*nasty comments*” if she would share details about her being lesbian illustrates that Helena does not experience her work environment to be psychologically safe. Helena does not feel accepted as the way she is and must hide a part of herself to fit into the group or adjust what she says to the audience she has, making her feel different and excluded from the group. Her frustration seems to stem from the fact that she must consider how others might react and describes how this takes up a lot of time and energy. Even though she is downplaying the issue, stating that “*I know it's very small*”, shows that it has an effect on her.

Exclusion might not always happen at the team level. Leo talks about how the organization can also make employees feel excluded by not allowing them to have a say in various matters. Leo talks about how involving people into the decision-making process makes employees feel as

though they can have an impact on the decisions that are made rather than just be the outcomes of a decision. This can eliminate the feeling of exclusion and is especially important when there are big changes in the company.

*“When there are in the companies those critical moments, or something big changes... At the strategic level...It is quite important to communicate and maintain that communication and also to involve people in the process, so that it does not feel that now the big men decide what happens, that we do not have the power or not even a mental image or there is no concrete strategy. Then when there is a lack of information and people are not included then they (employees) will replace this with their own fears and perhaps start to build negative images, because it is all ours. ... certainly basic psychological need to know what is happening and when and what is tomorrow and I have my own responsibility and my own job and my own family and my own plans and of course work is a pretty important part of our lives and if there are big changes, then you should from the very beginning include employees.” (Leo)*

From Leo’s description you can see that he highly values communication and openness from the management and leadership, especially in big organizational changes. This also shows how a lack of communication can lead to employees feeling excluded and as though they have no control over their work. Like Leo describes, work is an important part of employees’ lives, which is why it is important to focus on keeping the employees in the loop. When there are big organizational changes, it is important to include employees from the start to reduce the risk of employees feeling uneasy and stressed.

### 7.3.1 Consequences of exclusion

In the this chapter, I will present results that discuss the outcomes of exclusion. This will include examples of respondents’ lived experiences as well as their reflections of possible outcomes.

The feeling of exclusion can impact a person in many ways. One of the main things that came up during the interviews was how the feeling of exclusion can make you less interested in your

work, lowering your work motivation. The respondents also described how this might make you put less effort into your work and cause you to change workplaces.

*“Well, it affects the work like.... your motivation to work may not be so good and then you get a little bit the feeling, that can I do this? Or do I have permission to do these things on my own?” (Mari)*

*“Of course, of course, if it affects the work. I mean if particularly.. if you have a lot of responsibilities. If you don't have a sense of belonging, if you don't have a sense of, let's say, team work that you can count on the people you are working with. If you are just an island doing the dirty work and you stop giving a shit and you don't want to do anything and you don't keep yourself accountable and, and it's like this is bullshit I just want something else” (David)*

*“Interest in the job (lowers when you are excluded). It's a bit.... (You) change jobs probably, comes to my mind myself.” (Marina)*

Sanna discussed how the feeling of exclusion can have a negative impact on your focus. When you feel excluded you often start to reflect on why this is happening, which takes up a lot of your attention and energy. This again leads you to lose your focus and you start concentrating more on the feeling of exclusion rather than your work tasks.

*“It takes a little bit of the momentum then, because here you suddenly focus on the fact that you think about why this happened? For example, I have to think about this [task]. Then you don't concentrate on that. Because then all the other topics, that are more these social questions, come up and not the [task], and it takes the focus away.” (Sanna)*

There seems to be a common concern between the respondents about how the feeling of exclusion has an overall effect on your work both when it comes to motivation, interest, and focus. This gives the impression that the work environment and how you are treated at work has a major influence on the respondents' work well-being. When they are feeling excluded, the respondents seem to care less and are overall not as satisfied with their work.

The feeling of exclusion can also have a personal impact, depending on your previous experiences in life. Sanna, for example, explained that the feeling of exclusion brought up bad memories from her childhood.

*“When I was a little girl, I was bullied at school, so I notice that those feelings from the age of 11..... They come to the surface in some way, that it's not a good feeling.”* (Sanna)

Sanna has clearly interpreted the situation, where she felt excluded, based on her previous experiences. This is a good example of how our experiences in life have an impact on how we view things and how things affect us. As Sanna also mentions, the experience left her feeling the same way as she did in her childhood, having a greater impact on her overall feeling. Even though the situation wasn't the exact same it still had the same outcome.

The following chapter will discuss how respondents have dealt with the feeling of exclusion. I will present the reflections of those respondents who had experienced exclusion firsthand.

### 7.3.2 Dealing with exclusion

This chapter will discuss how respondents have dealt with the feeling of exclusion. I will present the reflections of those respondents who had experienced exclusion firsthand. All three respondents who had firsthand experiences with exclusion dealt with the issue in a similar way. They had a rational approach to the issue, trying to make sense of the situation. When reflecting over the situation, the respondents often tried to understand the other's point of view as well as understand why they were not included.

*“Well, it is just that or at this point I then just thought about it and I went through the fact that yes well, I have no such role that I should be there, that I have no, I have nothing more to contribute to it. And then, of course, sometimes I think that I'm glad I don't have to be there [laughter].”* (Mari)

*“As a sensible adult you need to understand that I am no longer the little girl who was left out, but that here is another person who does not understand that what*

*their work... like their actions how do they have an impact? They think that maybe they are protecting me, so that I don't have to be present at the meeting.” (Sanna)*

In their reflections, the respondents often referred to external factors such as their role or the other person's ignorance as factors that lead to the exclusion. This shows that they do not view experienced exclusion as something deliberate or inherently bad. Even though the exclusion has clearly affected them and has made them feel vulnerable, they downplay the situations or find explanations for them. However, Sanna reflects that she sometimes has thought about that exclusion is based on her being a woman in a man-dominated field. This can be seen as Sanna's way of reflecting on herself and her own thoughts in comparison to others, once again aiming to understand the other's point of view.

*I don't know, I sometimes think more about whether it's because I'm a woman, it's my own thought, it doesn't necessarily mean that they think that way. It's not always about the fact that it's the others who do it, it's your own thoughts.”*  
(Sanna)

The respondents also talked about what actions they have taken to improve the situation. Helena for example reported that she has tried to make an impact by taking part in volunteer work, climate marches and organizing pride events. These actions are more aimed at making a difference in society, not just at work, but either way trying raise awareness. Sanna on the other hand talks about how she decided to voice her concerns directly to her colleague as well as her leader. This way she was hoping that they would notice how these actions make her feel excluded.

*“I try to play an active role in improving things, for example by organizing or taking part in climate marches or Pride events.... Other volunteer work.”*  
(Helena)

*“Well, it... yes, I said directly to [colleague's name] that yes, I needed to be involved so that I could get that invitation so they sent it and then I discussed it also with my leader in our development discussion that this is..... It is important that people feel that they are a part of something else.” (Sanna)*

Both Sanna and Helena clearly have taken on an active role after feeling excluded. Since Helena's experience was based on more personal exclusion, it makes sense that she also has resulted in making a difference on a broader range, since the topics are important to her personally. Sanna also took the initiative by opening the discussion about the exclusion to reduce the risk of this happening again. Even though both respondents described the exclusion to be based on external factors and dependent on how others act, it still seems like they feel that they can with their actions also impact the outcome. By taking an active role, they can influence others to act better.

## 7.2 The role of leadership in creating inclusion

In this chapter I will present how respondents explained the role of leadership in shaping inclusion. This will also include a presentation of the different roles leaders are perceived to have when creating inclusion at work as well as what actions employees consider important for them to feel included in the workplace

In the interviews, all the respondents mentioned the importance of leadership when creating an inclusive environment. This included both the role of the management team and the respondent's immediate leader. In this chapter I will be referring to the top management of the company when talking about management, while the word leader is referring to the respondent's immediate leader or team leader.

Leo for example talks about how he considers leadership as something essential in creating an inclusive work environment. He sees leadership as a starting point in creating the culture, since leaders have a major influence on the team and are responsible for representing the company's culture and values.

*"I mean, it's very important in my opinion. Many things come from the leader and influence or in a way the leader represents the company's culture." (Leo)z*

The commitment from the management is also considered important, with Helena pointing out that the extent to which management believes in the importance of inclusion has a major impact

on the work environment and how inclusive it is. The quote also highlights the importance of transparent and clear communication. When management talks about the importance of inclusion they should not only refer to the typical “*advertising words*”, but also convey their actual commitment to the topic. The communication should also be clear enough for all employees, making sure that everyone understands the importance.

*“The management. I mean, the management has so much influence on how much they really believe in their advertising words. What they put when and where. Is it just that it is said because it has to be or in such a way that okay, we do this and it is really useful to us and we make it, take concrete things from it and extend it to all employees that it is not just that everyone knows this, that this paper has no concrete purpose but ... it is done just because it has to be” (Helena)*

Both quotes show how the respondents view leadership as a vital part in creating an inclusive workplace. They put great value on the way leaders and the management team communicate about the importance of workplace inclusion and how they represent the company’s culture to employees: The respondents also see the commitment from management and leaders to greatly influence the way employees view the issue of workplace inclusion, giving the impression that they see the management and leaders to be responsible for creating an inclusive environment.

### 7.2.1 Leaders as role models

When discussing the role of leadership in creating inclusion at work, one of the main things that came up in the interviews was the responsibility that leaders have as role models. This included both the management team and the immediate leader. The quotes below show how respondents consider the management team and leaders to be responsible for setting the tone when discussing inclusion. The respondents considered it to be important that the management team highlight the importance of inclusion, because without this, employees will not be engaged or motivated. The respondents also considered it important that leaders also follow the same commitment, making sure that they show the value of inclusion.

*“I mean, that's absolutely central. It is pointless to think that the employees will get excited about things if it seems that the management a)is not interested b)possibly despises the whole idea. That okay this is clearly only a "pakkopulla" (Finnish expression of having to do something) for them , which someone from the outside forced and not because they see some value in in it” (Helena)*

*“Also within the organization, management and leaders bring these issues to the table in one way or another. Considers it in a different way that it's not, not just some term or or term... way.... of leading, that they really think about these things” (Leo)*

This shows the way employees look up to leadership, valuing the opinions of leaders and management and following their lead. It also illustrates how employees view the importance of inclusion is shaped by how the management and leaders approach it.

Even though leaders and management were perceived as role models when creating inclusion at work, respondents also considered the shared responsibility. Sanna for example talks about how the leader carries the responsibility of showing “*the way*” for teammembers, but also puts emphasis on the collective effort that is needed to create an inclusive environment. Sanna is considerate of the fact that even though the leader is the main person in showing the way, they are also only human and they, like anyone else, and can benefit from the support from the team.

*“Well, he is the leader, who should show the way. But he's nothing more than a person he also.... But we should try together to remind each other that "In English please.” (Sanna)*

In the quote, Sanna is considering her own role in creating the environment, by using words like “*we should try*”, further emphasizing that the environment is created together, not just by the leader. This gives the impression that Sanna values her leader and is considerate of the leaders capabilities, while also taking an active role herself and values the input from everyone in the team.

This common responsibility is also something Helena points out. Helena talks about management as the leading figures in creating the work environment, since they are in a position of power and are the ones who make the decisions and enables inclusive environments to form by making it possible in practice. Helena also describes how management should “lead by example”, which indicates a perception of management being a role model for employees.

*“Everybody has a responsibility, but the management of course has the most responsibility. Leading by example and...being in the decision-making position on how to make it possible in practice”* (Helena)

Helena’s description shows that she places great value on the management and views their efforts as the most important. With the statement *“Everybody has a responsibility”* it also seems as though Helena considers herself and her coworkers as vital parts of the environment, but without proper leadership, this doesn’t have the same effect.

Respondents also emphasized that management and leaders not only lead the way by communicating about the importance of inclusion at work, but this should also be reflected in their actions. For example Mari talks about how the immediate leader can with their own actions show the importance with supporting cooperation and enable a way of doing things together.

*“If the leader themselves are like that...they with their own actions creates... (or) enables (or) like, supports a way of doing things together.”* (Mari)

Helena on the other hand talks about how the lack of a leader’s action taking is a way of showing how much they actually care about creating an inclusive environment or how important they consider this. She gives an example of allocating necessary resources, implying that if the leader doesn’t prioritise giving the resources needed, this is a clear indication of how the leader views the issue.

*“The fact that you can't get the resources to do anything, so it is of course [small sigh] a very concrete indication of whether you think this thing... whether it has value or not?”* (Helena)

David also emphasized that the actions taken by the management or leaders are what creates the true feeling of inclusion and a sense of belonging. David explains that the way he perceives his employer and the culture is all influenced by actions.

*“Those concrete things leave an impact and create loyalty and a sense of belonging. You know all these things that I feel, let's say, towards, towards the company. The good, the bad and the ugly. All these things have been influenced in concrete actions.”* (David)

This can be interpreted as employees way of viewing concrete actions as the management's and leaders genuine way of showing the importance of inclusion. This also gives the impression that even though employees value that management and leaders communicate about the importance of inclusion, it should also be reflected in concrete actions. Employees seem to care more about what is actually being done to create an inclusive environment rather than simply stating that this is important for the company. The concrete actions also has a greater impact on the employees, which can be seen in David's statement

### 7.2.2 Leaders as the facilitators for employee input

Respondents appreciated the way leaders ask for input from employees, making them feel more included. David, for example describes a time when his leader involved him in the decision-making process in a project, asking for his opinion instead of simply mandating how the task at hand should be completed.

*“He asked my opinion. Like he doesn't tell me we will do this like this. He tells me how can we do this? He has the objective clear in his mind.... But he always asked how we do this rather than “Hey, let's do this”.* (David)

David seems to appreciate how he was able to have an influence on how his work tasks will be completed, giving him more authority and a sense of inclusion. This can also be viewed as an example of how the leader values the input from the employee who is completing the task, making the employee feel noticed and appreciated.

The inclusive behavior of the leader is also something that came up in Leo's description of an ideal leader. Leo explains that the ideal leader is inclusive, does not command team members but rather encourage them to give feedback and share their opinions. Leo also talks about how an ideal leader should actively try to get employees involved.

*“Or I mean I see it that it is then an inclusive..ehm... leader. Typical that they do not command, but just invite (employees) to share opinions and try to get people involved.” (Leo)*

Similar characteristics come up in Mari's description. She describes how the leader's role is to listen to employees and their thoughts and ideas. Utilizing these ideas can create a greater sense of inclusion when employees notice that their ideas are realized in practice. Mari talks about how it nowadays at the company is more common that employees are involved and that they, together with the leader, come up with solutions instead of the leaders and management dictating everything.

*“That they listen to their employees. Listening to ideas and thoughts and.... and.... and so that if there are really good.... ideas that come up, then they will be taken into use or they will be utilized and then it will surely come to that, that hey, I came up with that thing and now we are doing this so that [laughter] that it will again be the feeling that hey, I am involved in this thing and.... That it's not just.... like I said that it's no longer the case that it's just the...leader, the management that determines...dictates everything but yes, nowadays we are discussing more and more and we are being involved in the discussions where we go through the problems and ask the leaders directly and they ask how you think this should be solved and.... if you have any ideas and.... and then we encourage everyone to take the initiative and.... observations and everything of this kind.” (Mari)*

Marina also has a similar description. According to Marina, the leader's role is to notice everyone in the team. This means listening to employees, be there if they have any worries and hear employees' ideas or suggestions.

*“Well to notice everyone, that is... it's his role. If we have issues, then he listens. What can we say or suggest.” (Marina)*

This gives the impression that the respondents value leaders who take their employees into consideration, making them feel seen and heard. It can be interpreted as a concrete way of including employees, making them feel a part of the company and that their input is important. From Mari's description you can also notice a clear sense of pride and joy when your ideas are heard and utilized, giving the impression that this is something that is appreciated by the employees and that this leads to an overall satisfied feeling at work. There is also a sense of communality, especially in Mari's description. The way she talks about “we are being involved in the discussions” is a clear indication of her regarding herself as a part of the team.

Another theme that came up during the interviews was how employees feel trusted when leaders ask for their input. Marina describes a time when her leader asked her to be a part of a bigger project at the company, which made her feel more included. She also explains how this made her feel good, as she interpreted this as her leader trusting her abilities.

*Or I don't know if it is when there was a transfer, pretty big project that [leader] came to ask and well pretty nice they trusted (me), you know? It was actually not such a simple....project. But I trusted myself that I could do it. Secondly, I know the work and then I get along with people at the same time very well. I always try to balance myself not going where I don't have to go, not talking anywhere where I don't have to talk, that's how it goes. And it's one of the projects, I actually had a bit of fun and that they've taken me on and asked me. They didn't demand, just ask if I want to participate. It was quite...this was probably my part at [the company]. It was a really good experience. It's a great feeling when you get it right and everything's good, everybody's happy.” (Marina)*

This encounter seems to have been particularly important to Marina, making her feel like a trusted and valuable part of the company. This trust empowered her to view her own strengths as something positive and understand how she was a valuable part of the project. Marina also gives the impression that she often reflects on her own abilities and actions such as *“I balance myself, not going where I don’t have to go”*. This also seems like she doesn’t naturally insert herself into situations where she doesn’t need to be, which gives the impression that it was even more meaningful for her to be asked to be involved since she doesn’t naturally end up in those situations. She also seems pleased with the outcome, finding it pleasant that everyone was happy with the results and that she could contribute to something good at the company, playing her part.

### 7.2.3 Leaders as facilitators for open discussion

A few respondents also discussed how transparent communication and open discussion can make employees feel more included. Sanna for example brought up an example from her previous workplace on how her leader facilitated regular meetings to ensure everyone stayed in the loop of what’s going on in the company.

*“Well, it’s about sharing information about what’s happening in the company. It generally concerns everyone... We used to have a practice at my other job, where once a week, or once every two weeks, we had a meeting where the leader asked everyone around the table to share what they were currently working on and what their biggest challenges were. Just for general information, no need to go into too many details, but so that your colleague knows what’s happening in the company.”* (Sanna)

Marina also discussed a similar example, where she talked about how the team would benefit from having regular meetings where they can discuss their own job and current issues. This would allow employees to share pressing issues with everyone in the team, making sure everyone stays in the loop.

*“We had a meeting once a week, although the work is different, but still we had it. For example, If I had some issues or anything else that happened during the week, something that I saw with my own eyes that needed improvement, and I presented it at the meeting. It was actually good. No need to talk every week; once a month is enough for us. Every employee thinks about it during the month or runs into something at some point, and then everyone knows about it, not just two people, you know? For example, if something happens to me, I can tell two people that I will talk to, but the third, fourth, fifth, they don't know about it, and then it comes up later, and it's good that everyone knows. “ (Marina)*

Both Sanna’s and Marina’s encounters show the way communication makes the team closer and creates a sense of community. It seems like Sanna and Marina find it important to be aware of what’s going on, since this makes the work more of a team effort rather than you being only focused on your own role. This can also be seen as an effort to make you feel less alone, since you have a team around you to support you if you need it.

#### 7.2.4 Leaders as a “support system”

Many respondents also described the leader’s role to be a support system and how the support from their immediate leader made them feel more included. Helena for example talks about how her leader is always eager to listen to her ideas and is there to support her to develop herself with for example new trainings. Helena also finds this type of support very motivating.

*“I must mention my immediate leader, who is really encouraging. Whatever I come up with, they are likely to respond with enthusiasm, offering support and asking how they can help. If I find a training or topic that interests me, they encourage me to share and assure me that the company will cover the costs. This kind of support is very motivating.” (Helena)*

Leo also reflected on how the support from the leader to openly discuss for example career development not only make you feel included, but it can also lower the risk of turnover This can

be a proactive step to make sure employees feel content with their work and are not afraid to speak up and discuss with their leader.

*“At work and in my role, and vice versa, if... we dare to speak and share our own thoughts or life plans or ideas... it might be that, for example... my role no longer fits, and maybe I want to develop, and if the leader notices and sort of supports and nurtures the enthusiasm, then... then... of course, it's a win for the team and the organization, and there's no unnecessary turnover. If it's only when someone has left that you start investigating what happened, why you actually left, and... Then it comes up that... there were personal interests that I didn't have the space to use my potential or my ideas didn't come through.” (Leo)*

Marina also discussed how her leader has helped her take on her new role and is available to help and offers support in further training possibilities if needed. She also brings up how they have development discussions with her leader where she can discuss more about future developments in her role. Marina also points out that it is beneficial for the team and the company if she is trained, because it increases the knowledge level in the group.

*“And then this work. It's new and the training, we always looked at it together. Then there is the development discussion. It's normal, we chat a bit.” (Marina)*

*“Of course, as I mentioned, there's guidance provided. There are training opportunities if needed. And it has quite an impact because if I have the training, then the team knows more. That's a plus for the company.” (Marina)*

All of the three respondents' encounters give the impression that employees value the support from their leader, making them feel more included in the work environment. A common theme in all these quotes is that this support also shows employees that they are heard and seen by the leader, making them feel content. The way respondents talk about the benefit of the company also gives the impression that they view that they play a role in the whole organization and that they have an impact on the bigger picture as well. This also indicates the way they feel a part of something bigger than themselves and the support from the leader helps to achieve this.

## 8 Discussion

The aim of this study was to use Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore (1) lived experiences of inclusion and exclusion in organizations as well as (2) how leaders and the work community contribute to shaping inclusion from the perspective of employees. This study sheds light on the importance of workplace inclusion, highlighting the value of inclusive leadership. The results from this study are aligned with previous research in the field and provide valuable insights for organizations and scholars. This chapter will include a summary of the results as well as a critical reflection of the study and recommendations on how to apply the results in organizations and future research endeavors.

The results of this study show how employees feel included when they are appreciated for their unique abilities and are valued as a part of the community. The respondents indicated a need to be noticed as an individual while simultaneously feeling like they belong to the team and the organization. The respondents felt included once these needs were met. This can be explained with the help of Brewer's Optimal Distinctiveness Theory (M. Brewer, 2012, 1991) that explain how humans have a natural need for feeling similarity with others and simultaneously a need for uniqueness. According to the theory, humans are more motivated to identify with groups when these two needs are met, explaining how the feeling of inclusion is achieved once employees feel that they are seen as individuals and appreciated for their unique abilities while also being valued as a part of the community. The results from this study are also in line with previous research in the field. For example, Shore et al. (2011) framework of inclusion argues that individuals feel that they belong to a work group when their need for belongingness and uniqueness is satisfied. Other studies have also come to the same conclusion that the feeling of inclusion is achieved when the employee needs for belonging and uniqueness are satisfied (Ashikali et al., 2021; Chung et al., 2020; Veli Korkmaz et al., 2022).

The concept of task and social inclusion can also be visible in the results from this study. When reflecting upon situations where the respondents had felt included, they discussed situations where they had been asked for input on specific tasks or projects, which is a clear example of task inclusion (Nguyen et al., 2023). Spending time with colleagues outside of work and being

asked to join events were also situations where respondents had felt included. This is linked with social inclusion that essentially refers to employees feeling that they are involved in social interactions and dynamics in the workplace (Nguyen et al., 2023).

Respondent's feelings of inclusion were often influenced by the possibility of active participation, showing that the respondents valued opportunities to voice their opinions and have an impact on topics in the work environment. Being able to participate in decision-making made the respondent feel like their opinions were valued and appreciated and increased their sense of belonging and inclusion. Shared activities and common events were also considered important to feel included, since they allowed employees to spend time with coworkers as well as share ideas and thoughts together with the team. These elements are also core parts of Mor Barak and Cherin's (1998) "inclusion-exclusion" model, aimed at examining how employees perceive themselves as being a part of the organization. The dimensions of this model (work group involvement, influence in decision making and access to information and resources), all came up when the respondents' discussed situations where they felt included. When talking about inclusion, respondents brought up for example situations where colleagues kind actions had made them part of the team as well as how possibilities to impact decisions both within the team but also in the organization made respondents feel more included. The respondents also brought up that having necessary information and support from the team made them feel more included.

Starting from the commitment from management to leaders asking employees for their input, the respondents deemed the role of leadership to be important when creating inclusion at work. The respondents reflected upon the leader's responsibility to be a role model as well as the leaders' actions to promote inclusion through facilitating employee involvement, open discussion and offering support. Respondents also brought up the importance of commitment from the company's top management to creating an inclusive work environment. These results offer support to previous research in the field, as research have found both the commitment from top management (Maini & Heera, 2019) and the role of leadership (Choi et al., 2015; Mitchell et al., 2015; Nishii & Mayer, 2009; Panicker et al., 2018) to be important contributing factors in creating inclusion. The respondents' experiences with leaders and their perceptions of the leader's role are aligned with the descriptions of inclusive leadership. Inclusive leaders aim to address the human needs of belonging and uniqueness (Shore et al., 2011) and encourage

members to contribute with their uniqueness to achieve a positive outcome for the group (Randel et al., 2018). These characteristics could for example be identified in respondents' reports on how leaders listened to their ideas and wanted them to voice their opinion to the develop the work together.

Even though respondents viewed leaders as having a key role in creating inclusion at work, they also emphasized the shared responsibility of all employees in creating the environment, including themselves. Respondents considered, for example, personal attitudes, experiences and motivation have an impact on how important you feel inclusion is and how much effort you put into creating an inclusive environment. This is supported in previous research about intrinsic motivation (Bidee et al., 2016), showing how employees are more motivated in engaging in activities that are aligned with their intrinsic motivation. As the respondents explained, when you personally view inclusion as something important and have a positive attitude toward it you become more motivated to act in a way that enhances inclusion.

In general, the respondents in this study felt as though they were included at work, and they were happy with their current employer. There were, however, instances where the respondents had experienced exclusion at work. In these examples there were many common themes that can once again be connected with the Optimal Distinctiveness Theory (Brewer, 2012, 1991). When individuals weren't noticed and appreciated for their unique abilities, or they felt like "the odd one out" it made them feel excluded. This further emphasizes the importance of meeting employees' needs for having a sense of both uniqueness and belonging to achieve a feeling of inclusion.

The respondents also reflected on how they felt they dealt with the experience of exclusion. Often this included rational thinking, where the respondents explained the issue by using external factors such as their role requirements or colleagues' ignorance rather than blaming themselves for the exclusion. This could be due to the employees feeling overall satisfied with their work environment and their strong awareness of their own abilities, which has been shown to make individuals less likely to blame themselves in cases of exclusion (Scott et al., 2015). In contrary to Scott et al.'s study (2015), there weren't any indication that respondents would interpret colleagues as envious when they felt excluded. The respondents tried to be understanding and seeing the colleagues' point of view as well, rather than assuming they were envious.

Respondent's encounters of exclusion also brought up many negative consequences of exclusion, including lowering your work motivation and job satisfaction, making you contemplate switching jobs. Similar results have been achieved in previous research about workplace exclusion (Francis & Michielsens, 2021).

Respondents reported many positive outcomes of inclusion at work. One of these being that the feeling of inclusion leads to a sense of psychological safety, increased job satisfaction and work-wellbeing as well as enhancing your work performance and increasing motivation. This is in line with previous research where psychological safety (Aslan et al., 2021; Gonzalez et al., 2020), job satisfaction (Acquavita et al., 2009; Brimhall & Mor Barak, 2018) and higher work engagement (Aboramadan et al., 2021; Panicker et al., 2018) has been identified as key outcomes of inclusion. Previous research in the field has also pointed out that inclusion has been linked to recruitment effectiveness (Francis & Michielsens, 2021) and culturally agile organization (Selzer & Foley, 2018). These do not, however, come up in the results from this study. This can be explained with this study focusing on the employee perspective. The effectiveness of recruitment or the extent to which the organization is culturally agile might not be things that employees focus on or even notice. It is therefore understandable that the importance of inclusion is shown through respondents' feelings of psychological safety, job satisfaction and motivation since these are things that employees can notice from themselves.

Even though this study provides valuable insights into how employees experience inclusion at work, there are some limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the study used a small sample size of six participants. While the IPA method recommends using a smaller sample (Smith & Osborn, 2015) to get an in-depth understanding, this restricts the possibility of making general assumptions of the results. Following IPA recommendations, the sample size is also homogeneous and consists of employees working at the same Finnish STEM company. This may limit the applicability of the findings to other industries or cultural settings. In the future it could be beneficial to expand the scope and conduct a cross-industry comparison to get more knowledge about how the feeling of inclusion might vary in different cultural settings. The study also focused on just how employees perceive inclusion at work and how they view the role of leadership and the work community in creating inclusion. The sample intentionally focused on just employees, and did not consider input from leaders to address a gap in the current literature.

There is however a need for further research, evaluating the differences between how employees view inclusion at work and how leaders perceive the same issue.

Another important factor to consider in this study is the potential influence of power dynamics during the interviews. Since I am also employed at the same organization as the respondents, this might have had an influence on the participants' openness and honesty. Even though actions were taken to ensure a neutral and comfortable environment for the respondents, this is still something to consider when evaluating the results of this study. The respondents were made aware of the results being used for HR development work at the company, which might also have an impact on how honest the respondents were in their answers. I did, however, ensure the anonymity of the respondents, which hopefully still allowed them to feel comfortable in sharing their experiences. To enhance the chances of employees feeling comfortable being completely honest it could be beneficial to conduct an anonymous survey. By doing a survey it would also allow a broader sample size, making the results more generalizable. This could however take away from the depth of knowledge that a qualitative method like interviews can provide. By combining both qualitative and quantitative methods to study the perception of inclusion at work, future research could capture both the depth and the breadth of knowledge that is needed to get a good understanding of employee's perception of inclusion at work.

The interviews used in this study were conducted during the summer of 2024, reflecting how respondents felt about the company culture at that specific time. This study does not consider the fact that employees' perception of inclusion at work might change over time. Future research could dive deeper into this and conduct a longitudinal study, exploring how inclusion practices and employee perceptions evolve over time and how possible organizational changes might have an impact on this.

When researching a sensitive topic such as inclusion at work, it was especially important to ensure the anonymity of the respondents. I took this into consideration during the entire process by, for example, using pseudonyms and removing the names of people mentioned in the quotes. This did however limit the quotes I could use in the reporting of results. Quotes that could have made the respondent identifiable had to be left out of the report to protect the anonymity of the respondent. These quotes included for example too many details about the person's job or the colleagues around them. This is something to consider when evaluating the results from this

study. For the future it could be beneficial for scholars to expand the scope of the study to include employees from multiple companies as respondents to make it harder for them to be identified.

Many of the quotes used in this study have been translated from Finnish to English. This might influence what impression the quote gives. Language plays a key role in how we explain things and by translating the quotes, some small details in how something was explained might have been left out due to the translation. I did analyze the transcriptions in the spoken language and only translated the quotes that were used in the reporting of the results. This was also done to minimize the risk of the analysis being influenced by the language of the quote. One can therefore assume that the translation does not have an impact on the interpretation of the results, but this is still something to consider when evaluating the results of this study.

The results from this study provide valuable insights of workplace inclusion both for organizations as well as the research field. The findings highlight the importance of focusing on how employees experience inclusion at work to minimize the risk for negative outcomes of workplace exclusion. One key area for organizations to focus on if they want to make employees feel included is to develop and support inclusive leadership, with for example various leadership training courses. As the results show, employees view leaders and management to have a central role when it comes to creating inclusive environments. It is important that management and leaders show their commitment to inclusion by concrete actions and by working as a role model. Embedding DEI as part of the company's values can help to convey true commitment. This also includes building leadership that creates psychological safety and actively aims to involve employees in decision-making and hearing out their ideas and thoughts. Open communication is also essential when organizations want to make employees feel included. This can be achieved by having, for example, regular team meetings where employees can voice their opinions and get the support both from the team and the leader to perform their job. This helps to improve the sense of task inclusion. The results from this study also show that creating inclusion is a lot about small but meaningful actions in everyday life. Both employees and leaders should focus on daily gestures that show individuals they are appreciated and valued as members of the team. Allocating resources to common events that boost the sense of community is also a great tool to enhance the feeling of inclusion, since they allow employees to connect with one another,

enhancing social inclusion. It is also important for organizations to actively follow how employees experience inclusion at work in order to adapt and develop practices over time. This can be achieved for example through regular feedback surveys, preferably anonymous to ensure a safe platform for employees to voice their opinions.

The results from this study also contribute to the existing research field by supporting theories such as Brewer's ODT (2012; 1991) and Mor Barak and Cherin's (1998) model of inclusion-exclusion, expanding the empirical evidence of these. The results are also in line with existing research, showing the positive outcomes of workplace inclusion (e.g. Aboramadan et al., 2021; Aslan et al., 2021; Brimhall & Mor Barak, 2018) the role of leadership (e.g. Choi et al., 2015; Nishii & Mayer, 2009; Panicker et al., 2018) and the negative consequences of workplace exclusion (Francis & Michielsens, 2021). By exploring how employees experience inclusion at work using IPA, this study provides new information to the research field, that is currently mainly theoretical works (Nguyen et al., 2023; Shore et al., 2018), quantitative data (Brimhall & Palinkas, 2020; Leroy et al., 2022) or focused on the leader's perspective (Roberson & Perry, 2022). The results from this study and its possible limitations also provide opportunities for further research, for example doing longitudinal studies across organizations. Another interesting topic could be exploring the differences between leaders experiences and the experiences of the employees.

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# Attachments

## Attachment 1

Interview questions in English:

### **Background/general questions:**

1. Could you tell me a little about your current role and responsibilities within the organization?
2. Could you tell me about your previous work experience and educational background?
3. What initially attracted you to work at [company name]?
4. Please, describe an ideal work environment and culture.
  - a. What contributes to this environment?
5. How would you describe the work environment and culture at [company name]?
6. Do you feel that you belong to a minority group? Which one/s?

### **Theme 1: Understanding DEI**

1. How familiar are you with the concepts of:
  - a. diversity,
  - b. equity
  - c. inclusion?
  - d. Have you come across these topics? If yes, where?
2. How would you define in your own words:

- a. diversity,
  - b. equity
  - c. inclusion?
3. Does DEI manifest in your everyday work? If so, how?
- a. Please, describe one or a few situations where diversity was central? Or equity? Or inclusion?

## **Theme 2: Experiences of inclusion and exclusion**

1. Please, describe a time when you felt included in the workplace (if you have had such an experience)?
  - a. What contributed to this feeling?
2. If you have felt included, how does feeling included affect your work?
  - a. Do you have a specific situation in mind where the feeling of being included affected your work performance?
3. Please, describe a situation in which you felt excluded at the workplace, if you have had such an experience?
  - a. What were the circumstances?
  - b. How did you cope with feeling excluded?
  - c. What actions, if any, did you take to address the situation?
  - d. What actions, if any, did others take to address the situation?
4. How do you perceive that feeling excluded affects your work?
  - a. Do you have a specific example or situation in mind?
5. How would you describe an ideal inclusive work environment?
  - a. What contributes to an inclusive work environment?
  - b. Do you have an example of how inclusivity may or may not be observable in your work at Ensto?

### **Theme 3: Understandings of an inclusive culture**

1. Please, describe an ideal inclusive work environment?
  - a. What contributes to an inclusive work environment?
  
2. How do you experience the overall culture of [company name] in terms of inclusion/exclusion?
  - a. Based on your experiences, what could still be improved?

### **Theme 4: Understandings of leaders' contribution to inclusion**

1. How do you understand the role of leaders in fostering an inclusive environment?
  - a. Please, if you have any, provide examples of actions taken by your leaders that have made you feel more included?
  
  - b. Please, if you have any, provide examples of actions taken by your leaders that have made you feel excluded?
  
2. What specific behaviors or practices by leaders contribute to an inclusive workplace?
  - a. What can lead to exclusion?

### **Theme 5: Understandings of employees' contribution to inclusion**

1. Please, describe a situation where a colleague or several colleagues made you feel particularly included?
  - a. What actions did she/he/they take?
  
2. Have there been instances where you have felt excluded by colleagues?
  - a. Can you describe what happened?
  - b. How did this affect you?
  
3. Based on your experiences, is it important that your colleagues create an inclusive work environment? Why or why not?

- a. What type of actions do you feel are the most important to create the feeling of inclusion?
  - b. Is there a particular situation where the importance was highlighted?
- 
4. How do you understand your own role in creating an inclusive work environment?
    - a. Have you contributed to a more inclusive environment?
    - b. If so, please, describe a situation in which you contributed to a more inclusive environment?
    - c. What type of actions did you take?

**Conclusions:**

1. Do you have any recommendations on how diversity, equity and inclusion could be improved?
2. Is there anything else you would like to mention?
3. Do you have any questions for me about the interview or the study?

## Attachment 2

Consent form in English.

Heading: Master's thesis on Diversity and Inclusion at the workplace

### **Background**

I am doing a master's thesis on diversity and inclusion at the workplace. The study focuses on employee experiences and perceptions of this topic.

This thesis is a part of my master's degree at the University of Helsinki. Your employer organization has granted permission for the research.

The data for this study will be collected via interviews. Three types of data will be collected: audio recordings, transcribed interviews and this consent form. The material will be archived in the University of Helsinki's OneDrive. The data will be handled with

strict confidentiality and your personal data will not be shown to anyone other than the Master's student, who is obliged to secrecy. Your identity will not be identifiable in the analysis of the data and reporting of the research. The processing of your personal data complies with the University of Helsinki's Privacy Policy.

*Participation is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw from the study at any time.*

### **Consent**

I hereby give my consent to participate in the study and to the use of my personal data in the thesis. The following personal data will be processed: employer organization, name, age, gender, possible identification with minority groups, professional and educational background, work tasks and duration of employment. The master's student will also treat the discussions in the interviews with confidentiality. My personal data will be archived as follows: audio recordings and transcribed interview material for up to 6 months after the thesis have been approved and this consent form for as long as my personal data are processed.

If you have any questions about the study, I will be happy to answer any questions you might have. Please contact: Aili Lundin, Master's student, tel: +358 40 686 2884, [company email]

Date and time: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature and name clarification

\_\_\_\_\_