Finnish Employees and their Adaptation to International and Local-style Organizational Cultures in South Korea

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Abstract: Nature of labor markets is changing all over the world. People, capital, goods, and services move faster across borders than ever before. Interactions between companies and nations happen more frequently due to globalization and rise of multinational organizations. While movement of labor increases and companies move their factories abroad, understanding possible cultural differences and training employees to work in culturally different working environments is needed to build successful co-operations. National culture can influence many aspects like preferred organizational structures and job conditions, which will further affect employees' satisfaction and adaptation into workplaces. Currently, there is only a handful of studies researching the cultural differences between Nordic and East Asian countries, and none researching Finnish employees in Korean workplaces. Moreover, current studies lack focus on individual experiences when studying adaptation into organizations in other countries. In this research, I focused on informants' subjective experiences on how Finnish and Korean cultures might affect Finnish employees' adaptation to workplaces in Korea. Most important results from the interviews were as follows. Upper management faced challenges especially in relation to Korean employees' kinship and third-party relations that were hard for them to manage as foreigners. However, it was rather easy for upper management to come into the company as they automatically obtained their position and power. Employees in subsidiaries of European companies seemed to adapt rather easily as they did not have to adapt to all host country's cultural or organizational practices since they were under home company's work legislation and practices. Finally, Finnish employees in irregular jobs and Korean-style companies seemed to face most everyday challenges related to hierarchy, communication, and work-life balance. Especially short yearly holidays, and strict rules and lack of autonomy regarding work tasks and communications, was challenging for Finnish employees. This research can benefit Nordic companies and subsidiaries in East Asia by increasing their productivity and expertise pool through hiring foreign workers who adapt and work efficiently in companies abroad. Furthermore, this information can be used to help future employees from Finland or other Nordic countries to gain some knowledge and perspectives about Korean workplace culture before their placement. To answer my research questions, I used qualitative methods to collect and analyze my data. I conducted interviews on five Finnish informants who had experience working in Korea. Further, I used a thematic analysis to identify and analyze specific patterns and themes within the obtained interview data.

Key words: Interculturalism, adaptation, organizational culture, foreign employee, South Korea, Finland, Nordic countries.

I declare that no AI tools or technology have been used in this thesis.

Table of contents

List of Tables

1 Introduction

Due to economic globalization and technological advancements, the nature of labor market is changing all over the world. People, capital, goods, and services move fast across borders and interactions between companies and nations happen more easily than ever before. Furthermore, cultures and policies spread fast, and international competition has increased. (Torp & Reiersen, 2020.) Rise of multinational organizations and increased movement of labor, combined with Korea's low fertility rate and labor shortage, can only be expected to increase the number of foreign workers hired by Korean companies. Korea seems to be trendy among young people these days, and they are motivated to study and work in Korea. Moreover, Finland and Korea can be classified as countries with similar goals and cooperative initiatives, thus arguably there is a need to understand each other's cultures and ways of working to build successful co-operations.

Culture is not a concept that can be explained easily but it has many meanings that have changed over time. Weil (2017, 8) defines the term culture in simple terms as follows: "Culture consists of all the things we make and nearly everything that we think and do, again, to the extent that what we make, think and do is conditioned by our experience of life in groups". However, this is only one way of defining culture, that can also be defined in terms of structure and patterns, group membership, group-based power, or as means for achieving something, as a process of social construction, or as a collection of artifacts. Unlike any other species, we as human species show tendency to develop and innovate from one generation to the next generation, which can be seen as a distinctive characteristic of human cultural development. Humans are born into a culture, learn about the culture through living in human social groups, and transfer the culture from one generation to another. We cannot talk about something being part of a culture unless other people share the idea. Moreover, culture is not stagnant, but it keeps changing as new things are invented, and as circumstances keep changing so does culture. (Weil, 2017, 9.)

Material culture can be seen as the most obvious element of culture, but great part of culture is non-material culture, meaning for example our beliefs, norms, values, customs, traditions and rituals. Belief can be defined as a way of thinking. Some beliefs are universal and some more personal, like religious and political beliefs. Norms on the other hand are formal and informal rules on how to behave in some group or society, including how one dresses and handles interpersonal conflicts. Moreover, cultural values are linked to both beliefs and norm of a cultural community. Values, like equality, represent ideas of a group and can bring people within a group together. It can be hard to differentiate customs and traditions, but to put it simply, customs can be seen as ways of doing things

within a particular society, place or timeframe, and traditions can be seen as a set of beliefs or ways of thinking that affect one's way of thinking about the world and oneself. Finally, rituals are actions carried out repetitively at specific time or place. (Weil, 2017, 107–113.)

In everyday language the term culture is used to refer to people who share the same nationality, for example we talk about "Korean culture". Nevertheless, it can be confusing as nations are not homogenous (Weil 2017, 139). Moreover, the common culture relates to societies rather than nations (Hofstede et al., 2010, 21). From the perspective of my research and my aim to understand how Finnish people adapt to Korean workplaces, which suggests that there will be some cultural comparisons, I do think statements like "Finnish culture" or "Korean culture" are overgeneralized terms. It is no easy task to try to classify Finnish or Korean national cultures, as cultures are not black and white, neither do they equal the whole nation. Cultures vary between regions, and embody different groups, like social class, generation, gender, and religious or political groups to name few. Further, there needs to be a distinction between individual traits or personality and cultures. As we can see, it's not easy to define what national culture is, since so many different aspects seem to affect it. Thus, even though I talk about Finnish employees and how they adapt to Korean workplace culture, I focus on informants' subjective experiences of these two cultures and characteristics of Finnish and Korean cultures in simple terms, rather than aim to make generalizations about the cultures. This does not of course mean that all Finnish or Korean people or workplaces would be the same, but that there might be some characteristics worth studying.

All organizations, even globally dispersed ones, have corporate cultures (Schein, 2017, 40), and companies tend to reflect the national cultures in which they operate (Schein, 2017, 209). Moreover, Hofstede et al. (2010, 316) states that the national culture of the company greatly influences the planning and control of the companies abroad. When people enter a work organization, they bring their values with them, which contributes to the formation of organizational practices (Hofstede et al., 2010, 346) and dominant culture, which represents majority of members' core values (Robbins & Judge, 2017, 297). Knowing the cultural norms of employees in a country where a company does business is important since national culture can influence for example preferred organizational structures and job conditions (Robbins & Judge, 2017, 293).

In this study, I will use the term adaptation for consistency, even though the term integration would probably be more accurate in describing some informants' settlement into the host country after the initial relocation to South Korea. *Adaptation* can be described as adopting behavior and norms that are dominant in the host society or a process of individual adapting to a society in a way that does not

necessarily require close contacts with people from the host society. *Integration* can be seen as the next level of an individual settling into a new culture in the host society. In this level an individual has at least some level of cultural competence and language skills and has established relationships with people from the host society while striving to become a member of the society. Moreover, *assimilation* happens when an individual from a minority group adopts the culture and self-identity of a majority group. (Budyta-Budzyńska, 2011, 45–47).

I have always been fascinated by cultural differences and intercultural communication at workplaces, but frankly, there are not many studies researching the cultural differences between Nordic and East Asian countries. Even though there are some studies examining cultural differences between other nations and Korea (Froese et al., 2012; Bader et al., 2018), I think the current studies lack focus on individual experiences when studying adaptation into organizations. What summarizes my motivation to conduct this research well is the following thought: "The world is full of confrontations between people, groups, and nations who think, feel and act differently. At the same time these people, groups, and nations – are exposed to common problems that demand cooperation for their solution." (Hofstede et al. (2010, 4).

The aim of this research is to obtain information from Finnish employees working in South Korea (hereafter Korea) and to understand possible cultural aspects that affect Finnish employees' adaptation to workplaces in Korea. I would argue that some aspects of Finnish and Korean cultures, like being on time, are similar enough to not cause misunderstandings at workplaces. However, my presumption is, that some common aspects of Finnish workplace culture, like low-hierarchy and work-life balance, might hinder Finnish employees' adaption in South Korea. These possible differences need to be examined to prepare expatriates and employees for local practices to secure smoother adaption to foreign countries.

For now, I was only able to find one previous master's thesis and research on Finnish employees in South Korean workplaces. Määttänen (2014) argues in their thesis that hierarchical factors are one challenging aspect for Finnish people working in Korea. Hierarchical practices can probably still be found from most Korean companies, but hierarchical structures might not be as relevant in smaller companies. Moreover, as new generations bring some new values to workplaces, organizational cultures will naturally change. Recent study by Kim & Hamilton-Hart (2022) conveys that South Korean employees struggle with the conflict between traditional cultural norms and the need for individual autonomy. The study shows how some South Korean companies want to maintain hierarchy and traditional cultural norms in their workplace practices, which older employees are more

eager to agree on. However, it seems that younger workers tend to have more individualistic values and feel uncomfortable utilizing Confucian values and practices. This further decreases their motivation and commitment to the company. Generational differences in Korean society are discussed in one study by Park & Park (2018). According to the study, Korea has a rather wide gap between older and younger generations due to rapid industrialization and social changes during past few decades. The study classified generations as follows. Traditionalists, generation born around 1928–1945 that experienced many wars like the Korean War, valued hard work and sacrifice, and respect for authority. Boomers, generation born around 1946–1964, in general focus on their careers and seek personal growth. Some important events boomers experienced were Civil Rights Movement and the Women's Movement. Further, generation X, people born around 1965–1979, experienced the end of Cold War. This generation values diversity and work-life balance. Generation Y, people born around 1980–1995, are well educated, diverse, and these individuals grew up during globalization. Generation Y in Korea focuses on present, is realistic about current economic situation, values work-life balance more than previous generations and prefers horizontal relations. According to the study, there are some conflicts between younger generation Y and older generations that value more hierarchical structure. For example, while older generations see company dinners as part of organizational culture, younger generations are more hesitant to participate in them. (Park & Park, 2018.) Change in preference is also confirmed in recent study which shows that horizontal organization structures along with flexible organizational culture is important reasons for employee's long-time employment, satisfaction, and new employees' adaptation. (Kang & Yim, 2024). Interestingly, differences between generations can also be seen in more unexpected factors, like in humor. Kim & Pester (2018) explain how in Korean companies, humor is used to support harmony and hierarchy at the workplace. However, they state that organizational humor is experienced stressful and it might even create negative emotions especially for younger employees that often have more Westernized values. Furthermore, while talking about hierarchical structures in organizations, we cannot ignore the importance of leadership and differences between leadership styles within the same cultural context. Chan & Du-Babcock (2019) research shows that even though some groups might share similar cultural background, there is a considerable difference in what type of leadership behavior is accepted and what are the attitudes towards imbalance of power. The leader might have a specific leadership style, but it is not only the leader but also the team members that contribute to forming the leadership and structures.

Regarding gender equality, previous study by Um (2023) suggests that especially young women are ready to quit their jobs because of hierarchy and gender inequality at workplaces. Women felt

especially hopeless about a military-like hierarchy, being left out of male-only informal networking activities and being expected to work overtime and be fully available in order to have a long career at the company. Research regarding inequality between Korean and foreign workers is rather complex. Foreign migrant workers like professional workers and foreign investors often have higher income and face less discrimination in contrast to less-skilled workers that often work in poorly paid jobs and poor working conditions (Seol, 2012). Kim & Lee (2023) examined whether immigrant workers have wage disadvantages on Korean labor markets. The research results showed that foreigners in Korea earn around 17–29 % less than native workers and that the wage gap slowly decreases around 1.55 % per year spent in Korea. Interestingly, this is only the case among males and Asian immigrants, meanwhile women experience smaller wage gap from the beginning, and immigrants from non-Asian countries and Japan tend to first earn even more than native Koreans. However, this might be due to skilled migrants being more likely to move away from Korea to other destinations.

Even though good and long-lasting interpersonal relationships have been greatly valued in Korea, it seems that they don't play as important role as they used to. Kim et al. (2013) research on quality of interpersonal relations showed that the quality of relationships between an employee and colleagues did not predict employees' turnover intentions very strongly in Korea. Moreover, there was no connection between the quality of an employee and a supervisor's relationship and turnover intention. According to the research, one possible explanation for this is the radical transition of Korean organizational culture from relationship orientation to market orientation in the 1990s. First, a dramatic increase in foreign direct investment into Korea since the late 1990s helped globalize Korean business environment and push Korean firms to change and follow global best practices. Second, large-scale layoffs in the late 1990s resulted in the amended Korean Labor Standard Act, that made Korean workers realize that interpersonal relationships are not as important for their employment as before. Korean workers realized that they could be laid off at any time against their will. Third, Korean firms that survived and developed from the Asian crisis, further directed the transformation through adopting western human resource management practices through active foreign businesses. Arguably, globalization and increase in individualism might have further decreased the family-like atmosphere and emphasis in modern day companies in Korea. Miles et al. (2008) discussed about how South Korean firms have moved away from traditional practices, which indicates a move away from Confucian style company management in order for them to compete on the global markets. According to the research, Confucian traits such as patriarchy, collectivism, an emphasis on solidarity and cooperation, are no longer regarded as compatible with the modern market system.

There is one previous study by Bader et al. (2018) that examined German expatriates' work-life balance in South Korea. Since Finland and Germany score very similarly in Power Distance Index (Germany 35, Finland 33) and Individualism versus collectivism Index (Germany 67, Finland 63) (Hofstede et al., 2010, 102–103), I think the study can be used to reflect to my study on Finnish employees. Bader et al. (2018) discovered that German expatriates often felt that long working hours and culture of urgency contributed to the lack of work-life boundaries. Moreover, missing work-life boundaries decreased free time and possibility to control one's time, which both are important aspects of Western work-life balance. (Bader et al., 2018.) However, while work-life balance is something to aspire for, and long working hours are more often seen as an interruption to "other life" in Finland, research by Kim et al. (2018) shows that South Korean employees view long working hours rather positively. They argue that one reason for this might be national culture in which hard work is valued. Second, Bader et al. (2018) study showed how views on hierarchy, top-down communication, conformity, and social obligations strongly differ from German individualistic culture and mindset. Thus, expatriates felt these aspects limited their individual freedom resulting in stress and further affect the quality of their free time. Third, the results suggested that Koreans and Germans view the relation between work and life differently, and in general have different goals in life. For example, it is more common in South Korea to sacrifice time spent together to work hard for children's' education. In contrast, German parents generally value and prioritize time spend with their children when they are young. (Bader et al., 2018.) This view is supported by Lee et al. (2011) research that argues that in individualistic West, family resources can reduce a negative relationship between job stress and job satisfaction. Meanwhile in collectivistic South Korea, there is an opposite effect, family can work as an additional stressor rather than enrich work life. They argue that this is due to weaker separation between one's work and family roles in South Korea.

There are also two studies that specifically discuss about Nordic expatriates in China and Japan. Peltokorpi (2006) results from 30 interviews on Nordic expatriates in Japan show that verticality and collectivism as cultural values among contrasting communication styles and lack of shared language negatively influence intercultural communication. The importance of compatible communication and conflict styles on adaptation have been demonstrated by Froese et al. (2012) as well. However, it seems that English use at workplaces is more relevant regarding adjusting to work, than being able to communicate in the host language (Froese et al., 2012). According to Ng et al. (2025), language proficiency and cultural intelligence can predict cultural adaptation. In the context of intercultural communication, cultural intelligence can be seen especially important in higher context cultures, like Korea (Ng et al., 2025). Further, Selmer (2006) study on Western business expatriates in China

showed how language abilities had a positive impact on adjustment, strong correlation for interaction adjustment and weak for work adjustment. Thus, when we talk about language skill and adaption, it might be more relevant to discuss about how language affects interactions rather than overall adaptation to work itself.

It's important to think about what other factors make Finnish or Nordic employees satisfied to their work to better understand why some aspects might significantly decrease their job satisfaction and make adapting to Korean workplace culture more challenging. Froese and Peltokorpi (2010) argue that national cultural distance influences expatriates' job satisfaction. In other words, cultural differences between two countries are likely to increase stress among expatriates and decreases their job satisfaction. Further, Drobnic et al. (2010) discuss in their research how different work-related aspects influence quality of life in European countries. They found out that positive contributors, like autonomy at work and having a well-paid job, and negative contributors, like job insecurity and having a boring job, affect the quality of life. The study suggests that aspects like economic security meaning security of employment and pay, autonomy at work, possibility to advance on one's career, and overall interesting job contribute to being satisfied at work which further affect life-satisfaction. Torp & Reiersen (2020) also came to the conclusion that in Nordic countries job security is especially important factor in predicting life and job satisfaction. Drobnic et al. (2010) study shows that in Nordic countries people are satisfied with their job autonomy, and overall life satisfaction is high and work-life interference low in Finland. However, Finnish people were showed to have dissatisfaction with their wages. Moreover, the research shows that the tension between work and life in greater among women leading to decreased life satisfaction.

Finally, this research contributes to the existing literature through diverse set of themes and detailed descriptions of Finnish employees' experience on working in Korea. Further, I am not aware of existing research that would focus on western employees' experiences and adaptation to both international and local-style workplaces. This research can benefit both employees and the companies, that can increase their productivity and skill pool through hiring foreign workers who adapt and work efficiently in different cultural contexts. As companies versatile their production and move their factories abroad, understanding possible cultural differences and training employees to work in culturally different working environments is needed. Further, this information can help future employees from Finland to gain knowledge and perspectives about Korean workplace culture and vice versa. This research can offer some interesting insights about intercultural communication and organizational differences, especially for upper management in charge of Korean workers.

My research questions are:

1) Based on employees' own perceptions and personal experiences, how do Finnish employees adapt to international and local-style company cultures in Korea?
    a) What aspects have helped Finnish employees to adapt to workplaces in Korea?
    b) What aspects have been especially hard for Finnish employees trying to adapt to workplaces in Korea?
    c) To what extent is it possible to adapt as a foreigner, and to what extent are Finnish employees willing to adapt?

I used qualitative methods to collect and analyze my data. To find answers to my research questions, I conducted interviews on five Finnish informants who had work experience in Korea. The interviews took place both in Zoom, and face-to-face in South Korea. Thematic analysis was used as a method to analyze my interview data as it's flexible and can be used to identify and analyze specific patterns or themes within qualitative data. Some things need to be kept in mind while reading through this research. First, it's not easy to define national cultures, as so many aspects like region and social class can affect them. Further, every company has their own culture formed from individual peoples' values, thus these factors need to also be considered when discussing how national culture appears in organizations. Second, the sample of this study is rather small, thus conclusion about cultural differences regarding adaption cannot be drawn to consider all Finnish people. Third, cultures are always changing, and for example Korea could be seen slowly becoming more individualistic (Kim et al., 2013; Kim & Hamilton-Hart 2022), thus previous and future research might differ with this research at this time.

To be able to understand the process of adaptation, I examine how culture, organizations, and individual adaption styles can impact how individual employees adapt to workplaces. In chapter 2, the theoretical framework of my thesis, I explore Hofstede's cultural dimensions, organizational culture, and adjustment styles. In chapter 3, I discuss about the data collection process, analysis, research limitations, and ethical considerations. Chapter 4, background section, focuses on history and characteristics of Finnish and Korean organizational cultures, values, and market structure, that can help us understand research results obtained from this study. In chapter 5 I go through the results obtained through my interviews and reflect them to previous research. Finally, in chapter 6, I discuss more about the results and their importance in relation to current and future research.

2 Theoretical framework

In this chapter, I focus on understanding organizational cultures and different adaptation styles in order to provide a conceptual foundation for my thesis. With the help of variety of research related to organizational cultures and behavior as well as Hofstede's theory of cultural dimensions, I aim to explain adaptation in a context of cultural differences between Finnish and Korean employees. However, while doing this, I acknowledge that Hofstede's (2010) theory about cultural dimensions is not complete as it overlooks individual differences and oversimplify the connection between national and organizational cultures. Furthermore, in this chapter I touch upon research on different adaption styles. I use Bader et al. (2018) adaption styles to categorize and understand my informants' successfulness in adaptation, but it's important to keep in mind the effect of individual characteristics on adaptation as employees tend to perceive organizational cultures differently based on their personalities (Hofstede et al., 2010, 367).

2.1 Organizational cultures

So, what are organizational cultures? Robbins & Judge (2017, 296–298) talk about the meaning of organizational culture in their book *Essentials of Organizational Behaviour.* They describe organizational culture as a system of shared meaning held by members that differentiate one organization from another. Furthermore, they emphasize that culture could be seen as a social glue that provides standards for how employees should behave within the organization, and this further helps to hold the organization together. According to Schein (2017, 36–37), culture suggests that there is structural stability, depth, or integration that stems from a learned phenomenon of a group. Moreover, Hofstede et al. (2010, 6) argue that culture is learned from the social environment and shared with people who live in the same social environments, but it is also programming of the mind which distinguishes different groups from each other. Hofstede et al. (2010, 47) states that organizational cultures differ from national cultures in a way that members of the organization did not grow up in it, and that when they eventually leave the organization, they will also leave the organizational culture.

When people enter a work organization they bring their values with them, which further contributes to the formation of organizational practices and culture (Hofstede et al., 2010, 346). Gender, age, educational level, and nationality are often characteristics that influence one's values more one's membership in the organization (Hofstede et al., 2010, 348). Organizational culture can also differ inside one organization for example between low, middle, and top management, or between

professional employees and other employees (Hofstede et al., 2010, 373). Within organizations there is a dominant culture which represents majority of members' core values. However, in large organizations it's not uncommon for subcultures to develop in response to some problems or experiences a specific group within an organization faces. (Robbins & Judge, 2017, 297.) Schein (2017, 201) argues that conflicting signals and inconsistencies within a company will stimulate subcultures that can eventually create organizational conflicts that are hand to manage. Regarding internal integration in organizations, some problems that might arise concern language, authority, and trust. For example, how to create a common language and define group boundaries, or how to distribute power and status (Schein, 2017, 156).

How one adapts and socializes in the organizations depends on learned rituals and symbols of the organization (Hofstede et al., 2010, 348–349). Even though inexperienced foreigners can learn organizational rituals and symbols, it is hard for them to deeply understand the underlying values in them, unlike domestic employees who do not even have to think about the deeper value of rituals and symbols as they have become natural to them (Hofstede et al., 2010, 384). Schein (2017, 107–109) talks about the role of space as a status symbol. For example, people with highest status are likely to have the best locations or views, and body language is used to communicate how we relate to people, including who we sit next to or bow to. These roles of space and more subtle physical cues, like gestures and body position, symbolize organizational norms and are fully known only by insiders.

So how do organizational cultures form and change? Robbins & Judge (2012, 306) argue that top managers' actions set the general climate, meaning what's acceptable behavior, and employees then sustain and continue the culture. So does Schein (2017, 41–42) by stating that learning and culture formation happens through a leader that uses personal power to push towards a behavioral change and achieving a specific goal. Hofstede et al. (2010, 344) also states that organization culture is created and preserved by people in the organization, and it's rather difficult to change. Schein (2017, 239) goes deeper and divides forming of organizational cultures into formative stage, midlife, and maturity-and-decline stage. In the formative stage, the organizational culture grows, and it needs to be developed and articulated. Schein (2017, 78–79) also argues that early group experiences, successes and failures in the company, affect the company culture greatly. In organizational midlife, the culture has become more diverse, and subgroups have formed. This is also when leaders face issues regarding what elements to preserve and change. Finally in the maturity-and-decline stage the organizational culture often becomes dysfunctional and can only be changed through more drastic processes. (Schein, 2017, 239.) Schein (2017, 203) argues that in order for the new CEO to bring in

new cultural elements, they first have to get rid of senior management who has grown up with the existing culture. Otherwise, senior management and employees will naturally want to preserve the organizational culture which will undermine CEO's changes.

All organizations, even globally dispersed ones, have corporate cultures (Schein, 2017, 40). Robbins & Judge (2017, 297) state that organizational cultures differ in aspects like outcome-, people-, and team orientation, attention to detail, and risk taking. In the book *Organizational Culture and Leadership,* Schein (2017, 36–37) explains how thoughts and emotions of the members of organization tend to become more similar the older the organization becomes. This can create issues in subsidiaries of companies that move abroad as differences in thoughts and emotional processes affect company's efficiency and functions. On the other hand, some subsidiaries can have such strong corporate culture that they function similarly to the headquarters in other countries too. Local culture and practices influence businesses in many ways, and companies reflect national cultures in which they operate. When in other countries bribing is deemed illegal and unethical, in other countries it might be seen as essential part of doing business (Schein, 2017, 209). Thus, knowing the cultural norms of the workforce in a country a company does business is important for managers (Robbins & Judge, 2017, 39). National culture can for example influences preferred structures and job conditions. Research shows that in high power distance cultures mechanical structures are accepted better (Robbins & Judge, 2017, 293). Hofstede (2010, 415) mentions how national cultures can for example affect the process of negotiations. In negotiations, power distance affects how control is centralized, which further affects the status of the negotiator and the structure of decision-making. Moreover, in collectivist societies, there is a need for stable relationships, which means that time is needed to build deeper relationships and successful negotiations. National cultures can also affect the way we perceive work. Individuals from individualistic countries, work that interferes with family creates more stress than for individuals who are from collectivist countries (Robbins & Judge, 2017, 331).

The importance of groups, group dynamics and groups in relation to organizational culture are some aspects that are also relevant when discussing about adaptation to workplaces. According to Schein (2017, 197–204), groups give us security and help us get things done. Groups have beliefs, values, and behavior patterns that can become part of group's identity and will be taught to newcomers. Indeed, as a new member enters a company, they often encounter questions about their identity and role within a group, how they relate to other members of the group, and what is the direction and extend of authority within the group (Schein, 2017, 136). As humans, we have a need to classify people either to belong to "we", an in-group or "they", an out-group. To survive as a group, we have

unwritten rules and obligations that often apply to members of our group but not to members outside our group, at least not the same way (Hofstede et al., 2010, 12). People are more likely to invest in relationships within groups that they feel emotionally connected to (Robbins & Judge, 2017, 211). Furthermore, both positive and negative shared experiences strengthen our bond and feeling towards our group. Role expectations within a group direct our behavior and explain how other members believe we should act in different situations. Moreover, as groups have standards, groups can pressure individual member to change their behavior to match those standards. (Robbins & Judge (2017, 183–187.)

Through culture, norms are developed around authority and power in groups and organizations. The norms that are beneficial for the system and work tasks will eventually create a shared culture. More organizations are becoming culturally interdependent and have members from different nations. However, when trying to develop a common understanding within a working group, the differences in how authority is seen, are expected to create problems. (Schein, 2017, 174–175.)

2.2 Hofstede's cultural dimensions

Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory analyzes national cultures with the help of six dimensions that were developed from data obtained from IBM, multinational corporations' employees, and through comparison with other cross-national studies, like World Values Survey. Schein (2017, 97–99) classifies Hofstede's cultural dimensions as one of the earliest and comprehensive studies on beliefs, values, and ways of thinking within nations. Schein (2017) argues that regarding organizational cultures, Hofstede's dimensions on power distance and individualism versus collectivism, are especially relevant in comparison to other dimensions that would have to be studied further as they are culturally more complex. This is one reason for why I only go through Hofstede's cultural dimensions focusing on two dimensions, power distance and individualism versus collectivism. Further, Hofstede at al. (2010) argue that his theory can be used to pinpoint differences and similarities between national cultures. Due to this I wanted to use Hofstede's theory to see if I could compare Finland and Korea's national cultures. Hofstede et. al. (2010) state that we need to understand societies first to understand managers and leaders inside those societies. This means knowing what type of personalities there are in the society, how children are brought up, what is the school system and how children are divided into them, what historical experiences each generation has experienced, and what is the current role of government and politics in the lives of citizens.

(Hofstede et al., 2010, 25.) In this research I mostly focus on how Hofstede's cultural dimensions are manifested in workplaces.

Robbins & Judge (2017, 99) state that Hofstede's framework may be valuable way of thinking about differences among people, but we should be cautious about assuming all people from a country have the same values. While I do think Hofstede's theory can offer a framework for understanding differences between cultures, the theory has raised some criticism that needs to be kept in mind. Weil (2017, 133–135) raises criticism for Hofstede's theory first questioning the questionnaire that was not developed to study cultural values but to examine workplaces attitudes. Secondly, the sample size of around 200 people or less, in around 15 countries could be seen insufficient and not enough to generalize the results, especially for bigger countries. Third, the question remains whether Hofstede's cultural dimensions measure IBM (International Business Machines Corporation) company culture e.g. white-collar workers rather than national culture since the surveys were not administered to other groups like blue-collar workers or full-time students. Further, the employees were mostly men, which leaves out women's perspectives almost completely. Finally, the argument is that Hofstede's theory gives a static view of culture and does not consider the change that happens in cultures and has happened in world after Hofstede's study started. To conclude, it remains questionable how prevalent Hofstede's theory is in today's global world. However, because of the nature of my study, the use of qualitative methods and a small sampling, I think the theory can give my research a valuable theoretical framework and help me understand Finnish and Korean employees on an individual level rather than national level. Moreover, I was also curious to see whether Hofstede's theory corresponds with the results from my research and interviews.

2.2.1 Power distance

First dimension of culture is power distance which is often high in many Asian countries and in contrast low in Nordic countries. Based on Hofstede's research, South Korea has rather high Power Distance Index (PDI) of 60, on a scale from 11 to 70. In contrast, Finland has the index of 33. (Hofstede et al., 2010, 57–59.) Simply put, power distance measures how people with less power within organization accept the power to be divided unequally (Hofstede, 2011). Power relations can be recognized all the way starting from how children are brought up. Low power distance can be seen in Nordic countries where children are treated as equals since behavior towards other is not generally dependent on one's age or status. In contrast, in many high power distance Asian countries, parents ask a lot from their children and children are expected to obey their parents, even as they grow up

and become adults. Independence is not valued like in the West; thus, children are not expected to behave independently. Children are raised to be dependent and take care of senior people at home and outside it (Hofstede et al., 2010, 67.) As children enter schools and universities, similar respect for older people continues. For example, at the university, students are expected to take professors knowledge as a wisdom being transferred to them without contradicting it, instead of questioning the truth and asking questions like in many low power distance countries. (Hofstede et al., 2010, 69.)

So how does power distance transfer to workplaces and to boss-subordinate relationships? First, it's important to knowledge that high power and low power distance organizations both utilize different strengths based on the culture and are good in different task (Hofstede et al., 2010, 75). In relation to bosses, subordinates are unequal in high power distance workplaces and expect to be told what to do. Subordinates are more dependent on their bosses, and more unlikely to directly contradict or even approach to their bosses. (Hofstede et al., 2010, 60.) High power distance organizations are characterized by large number of supervisory personnel and the salary between the bottom and the top of the organization varies largely. In general, older bosses are more respected in high power distance organizations and employees' ideal boss is someone who they respect but are also comfortable with (Hofstede et al., 2010, 73.) This differs in low power distance organization in where younger bosses are often more respected and employees' ideal boss is someone capable and democratic. Low power distance organizations aim to be equal, and superiors are expected to be reached easily, and hierarchical system is more about convenience that anything else. (Hofstede et al., 2010, 74.) This is also supported by Ylöstalo (2007) research that compared the results from the Finnish working conditions survey to the Finnish culture categorized by Hofstede's cultural dimensions. According to the research, work in Finnish workplaces is organized so that it's not overly unequal, and descriptions about manager-employee relations show emphasis on cooperation and equality. (Ylöstalo, 2007.) Furthermore, in low power distance organizations there is lower number of supervisory personnel and hierarchical pyramids can be described as flat. Ranges in salary are not as large as in high power distance organizations and overall privileges for superiors are not desired. (Hofstede et al., 2010, 74.) In general, in low-power distance relations subordinates are more comfortable approaching their bosses and they are not as dependent on them (Hofstede et al., 2010, 60). However, it should be noted that authoritarian values can also be seen in many Western countries especially in less educated people and low status employees (Hofstede et al., 2010, 66). Thus, we must consider that there are also differences among Finnish workplaces regarding hierarchical structure. Table 1 below summarizes most important differences between small and large power distance societies.

Table 1. “Ten Differences between Small- and Large -Power Distance Societies”, edited from Hofstede (2011).

Small Power Distance	**Large Power Distance**
Use of power should be legitimate and is subject to criteria of good and evil	Power is a basic fact of society antedating good or evil: its legitimacy is irrelevant
Older people are neither respected nor feared	**Older people are both respected and feared**
Student-centered education	Teacher-centered education
Hierarchy means inequality of roles, established for convenience	**Hierarchy means existential inequality**
Subordinates expect to be consulted	**Subordinates expect to be told what to do**
Pluralist governments based on majority vote and changed peacefully	Autocratic governments based on co-optation and changed by revolution
Corruption rare; scandals end political careers	Corruption frequent; scandals are covered up
Income distribution in society rather even	Income distribution in society very uneven

2.2.2 Individualism and collectivism

Second dimension of culture is Individualism versus Collectivism. Individualism versus Collectivism relates to individual people and their integration to the predominant group (Hofstede, 2011). In individualistic societies interest lays on individual over group in contrast to collectivist societies in where one’s identity stems from being part of a specific group, *we* (Hofstede et al., 2010, 91). In collectivism individuals are loyal to groups they belong to, and those in-groups bring security to individuals (Hofstede et al., 2010, 92). On an Individualism Index (IDV) scale from 6 to 91, Finland obtains a score of 63 and South Korea 18. In general, high power distance countries are also more likely to be collective and low power distance countries more likely to be individualistic (Hofstede et al., 2010, 102−103). Moreover, individualism tends to be present in Western and developed countries (Hofstede 2011). Even though modern industrial societies tend to be individualistic, it is not the case with Korea which has remained rather collectivist despite industrialization (Hofstede et al., 2010, 131). However, according to Kim & Hamilton-Hart (2022), especially younger Korean workers tend to have more individualistic values and be more hesitant to commit to the company and its’ more traditional or collectivist values. Moreover, Ylöstalo (2007) describes how Finnish culture in fact has more collectivist characteristics than Sweden (71). While individualism shows up in Finnish workplaces as employees’ autonomy and personal input to work, collectivism can be seen in the collective structures of work community and society.

At workplaces, individualism can be seen in organizations as employees need for independence, personal time, and freedom in contrast to collectivism in which employees are dependent on the organization and more focus is put on what the organization does for its' employees (Hofstede et al., 2010, 93). Unlike in individualistic countries, where bringing up one's opinion is encouraged, in collectivist cultures one's individualistic opinion must be meshed into the groups' opinion (Hofstede et al., 2010, 107). Polite ways of turning down suggestions are used, and in general, saying "no" or otherwise confronting another person directly can be seen rude in collectivist societies (Hofstede et al., 2010, 106–107). Furthermore, at workplaces feedback is often given in a more undirect way (Hofstede et al., 2010, 122). In collectivist workplaces the interest of a group goes before one's individual interest (Hofstede et al., 2010, 119). Moreover, in group tasks, personal relationships and harmony within the group often stand more importance than the task or goal itself (Hofstede et al., 2010, 123). Table 2 below summarizes most important differences between Collectivist and Individualist Societies.

Table 2. "Ten Differences Between Collectivist and Individualist Societies", edited from Hofstede (2011).

Individualism	**Collectivism**
Everyone is supposed to take care of him- or herself and his or her immediate family only	**People are born into extended families or clans which protect them in exchange for loyalty**
"I" – consciousness	"We" –consciousness
Right of privacy	Stress on belonging
Speaking one's mind is healthy	**Harmony should always be maintained**
Others classified as individuals	**Others classified as in-group or out-group**
Personal opinion expected: one person one vote	**Opinions and votes predetermined by in-group**
Languages in which the word "I" is indispensable	Languages in which the word "I" is avoided
Task prevails over relationship	**Relationship prevails over task**

2.2.3 Other dimensions

To shortly introduce rest of Hofstede's cultural dimensions. Third dimension, masculinity versus femininity, explains how strong the distinction between men's and women's roles in the society is. The higher the score, the more masculine the country is. Finland and South Korea are rather close to each other on the scale from 5 to 57 (Finland 26, South Korea 39). The dimension is meant to examine masculinity and femininity on a societal level, not individual level, and to describe how values are

divided between sexes. For example, masculine scale includes values like competition and material success, and feminine scale includes values like quality of life and interpersonal relationships. At workplaces, femininity shows up as balance between family and work and minimum social role differentiation between genders. In contrast, masculinity means maximum social role differentiation between genders and work prevailing over family. Interestingly, women's values do not tend to differ from culture to culture unlike men's values. (Hofstede, 2011.)

The fourth dimension, uncertainty avoidance, reflects how people adapt to uncertainty within societies. Uncertainty avoidance relates to how much stress people experience in a society when they face an unknown future. Hofstede's dimension characterizes people from uncertainty avoiding countries, like Korea, more emotional and motivated by inner nervous energy. (Hofstede, 2011.) South Korea's uncertainty avoidance index is 85, but Finland's is not too far from it with 59, on a scale from 8 to 112. Interestingly, Ylöstalo (2007) mentions that in comparison to other Nordic countries, Finland has rather low tolerance for uncertainty compared to Sweden (29). In fact, it's closer to Germany (65) and South Korea's Uncertainty Index. Practically speaking this means that Finnish people are more eager to follow rules without questioning them, and value certainty and long employment relationships. (Ylöstalo, 2007.) In general, strong uncertainty avoidance societies are characterized by higher stress and anxiety, and uncertainty is seen as a threat. In these societies, there is a need for clarity, structure, and rules (Hofstede et al., 2010, 201). Furthermore, strong uncertainty avoiding cultures also prefer structure in their relationships (Hofstede et al., 2010, 197). Employers and employees of strong uncertainty avoidance cultures work well in structured and formalized environments, and they are motivated by the security of the company and the feeling of belonging. Further, there is a prevalent idea that people need to be busy. (Hofstede et al., 2010, 209–210.) In comparison, societies with weaker uncertainty avoidance have less stress and anxiety, formal rules are not seen as important (Hofstede et al., 2010, 231), and there is an idea that it is okay to work hard only when needed (Hofstede, 2011). Employees in the weak uncertainty avoidance countries perceive time as their framework, chaos at the workplaces is tolerated generally well, and the source of motivation are achievements (Hofstede et al., 2010, 217). Furthermore, in weak uncertainty avoiding countries, tolerance towards foreigners and ethnic minorities is higher and even positive compared to strong uncertainty avoiding countries (Hofstede et al., 2010, 231).

Fifth dimension, long-term versus short-term orientation relates to whether people are focusing on past, present or future in their efforts. In this dimension, South Korea (100) and Finland's (38) indexes are far apart on a scale from 0 to 100. In general, long-term orientation can be seen in East Asian

countries, and medium-term orientation in North-European countries. In societies with short-term orientation, there is emphasis on personal steadiness and stability, and service to others is seen as an important goal. In contrast, in societies with long-term orientation, it's seen that a good person adapts to the circumstances, and perseverance is seen as one important goal. (Hofstede, 2011.)

Regarding the sixth dimension, indulgence versus restraint, Finland's index is 57 and South Korea's 29 on a scale from 0 to 100. This dimension relates to control over basic human desires. Restraint societies are characterized by strict social norms that controls gratification. In restrained societies there is a perception of helplessness and lower importance of leisure. In contrast, indulgence in a society, appears as personal control over one's life and higher importance of leisure. (Hofstede, 2011.)

2.3 Adaption styles

According to Schein (2017), organizational cultures can be defined through external adaptation and internal integration, the latter being the perspective I focus on this study. Internal integration focuses on the creation of collective identity and common understanding on how group of people can function and efficiently work together. Internal integration can be created through aspects like language, boundaries, authority, trust and openness, and reward and punishment. Hofstede et al. (2010, 384–390) argues that foreign workers who enter a new organizational culture or culture often go through different stages when adapting. First when entering a new country there can be a feeling of euphoria or a honeymoon phase that is often shortly lived. After this many foreign workers start to experience culture shock. One might feel helpless and distressed as many things need to be learned again. Some people might even feel hostility towards a new unfamiliar environment. Finally, before reaching full stability in a new host country, foreign workers who go through a process of adopting local values, are often able to gain confidence and become integrated into the new society and social networks. Moreover, people in the host country play an important role in the adaption of foreigners into the society. Commonly people in the host country go through different stages before developing a full understanding of foreigners. If people in the host country are in contact with foreigners more regularly, they will eventually become more understanding towards other cultures. Nevertheless, foreigners cannot become fully integrated into the society unless they can meet with hosts as equals. These equal interactions can be created in places like work organizations, but language skills, or more specifically lack of them, might still become a barrier for full integration. (Hofstede et al., 2010, 387–390.)

I will shortly go through studies that categorize adaptation styles as I utilize them in analyzing my research results. While examining German expatriates in Korea, Bader et al. (2018) found four

adjustment styles: ethnocentric, disconnected, localized, and flexible. Among these styles, they found out that ethnocentric and localized seem to guarantee highest work-life balance satisfaction. Expatriates who implemented an *ethnocentric style* at work often worked in a German company and had a German boss, making the organizational culture and working style more traditionally German. Thus, there was hardly any pressure to adjust to different work-life boundaries. Further, expatriates who implemented a *localized style* were often pressured to adjust but also accepted the differences and were willing to change according to cultural context. However, expatriates who had a Korean supervisor often used a *disconnected style* and seemed to have the lowest satisfaction with work-life balance. They were often unwilling to change their work-life boundaries even though they felt pressured to adjust to Korean workplace culture. Previous research by Froese and Peltokorpi (2010) also supported these findings. They found out that employees that were sent to Japan by their companies in their home country were more satisfied with their jobs than employees who came to Japan by their own initiative. They argue that employees who were sent to Japan are less dependent on local employment and social interaction patterns and can get help from the home headquarters.

Peltokorpi & Zhang (2022) research on 79 Nordic expatriates in China and Japan can offer great insights to my study. Their study examined expatriate types and how they presented at the workplaces. Expatriates were divided into four categories. *Integrated bicultural expatriates* present strong host country culture and language identification. Expatriates in this group identify strongly through their home culture but also see value in host country's work practices and are overall accommodating. *Conflicting bicultural expatriates* are more critical of rules and regulations in the host country and identify more weakly with the host culture. Moreover, in workplace settings they are affect by both home and host countries' structures. *Cosmopolitan expatriate*s are open to interact and learn about new cultures, identify strongly with the culture in the host country, and might even think that Nordic working culture is not interesting or challenging enough. Finally, *monocultural expatriates* do not identify strongly with host country culture or language but rather identify with their home country values when working in a host country. To conclude, integrated bicultural and cosmopolitan expatriates are in more eager to accept local business practices.

2.4 Summary

Organization cultures are created and preserved by people in the organizations. When new employees enter work organization, they bring their values with them, which further contributes to the formation of organizational practices and culture. Many characteristics like gender, age, educational level, and nationality can influence values brought into the organization. For inexperienced foreigners it can be

hard to fully understand the underlying values behind organizational practices. Moreover, organizational culture can differ inside one organization between low, middle, and top management, or between professional employees and other employees. Top managers' actions often set the general climate for acceptable behavior, and employees then sustain and continue the set culture. New members encounter questions about their identity, role within a group, and how they relate to other members and authority within the group when they enter a company. In large organizations, it's not uncommon for subcultures to develop as a countermove to conflicting views for example between managers and employees. Since companies reflect national cultures in which they operate, local practices can influence businesses in many ways. Companies that move abroad can face challenges due to differences in thoughts and emotional processes which can affect company's efficiency and functions. Meanwhile some subsidiaries can have such strong corporate culture that they function similarly to the headquarters in other countries too.

In high power distance workplaces, older bosses are more respected, and subordinates are overall more dependent on their bosses. Subordinates expect to be told what to do, and they are more unlikely to directly contradict or even approach to their bosses from their unequal position. In contrast, in low power distance organizations younger and democratic bosses are often respected. Low power distance organizations aim to be equal, superiors are expected to be reached easily, and subordinates are more comfortable approaching their bosses. Hierarchical pyramids are rather flat and are primarily created for convenience in low power organizations. Second dimension, individualism, can be seen as employees need for independence, personal time and freedom. Furthermore, bringing up one's opinion is encouraged. In contrast, in collectivist societies one's identity stems from being part of a group. Individuals are loyal to groups, and those in-groups bring security to them. Thus, in collectivist organization employees are dependent on the organization and individualistic opinion must be meshed into the groups' opinion. Moreover, confronting another person directly can be seen rude as personal relationships are seen very important in collectivist societies.

Finally, according to previous research, *ethnocentric style* and *localized style* guarantee highest work-life balance satisfaction. Expatriates with *ethnocentric style* who worked in organizations that have similar culture and working style to their home country's organization were understandably satisfied. However, expatriates with *localized style* who were open to accept local practices and change according to the cultural context were also found to be highly satisfied. Similarly, in another study it was shown that even though an expatriate might identify strongly with their home culture, being open to learn about new cultures and find value in host country's work practices, like *integrated bicultural expatriates* did, will help expatriates to adapt to local business practices.

3 Methodology

In this chapter I first go through the data collection process and analysis and then talk about research limitations and ethical considerations. To answer to my research questions, I decided to use qualitative methods to collect and analyze my data. I chose to do interviews, since I wanted to understand Finnish peoples' individual situations and experiences about adaptation more deeply, and thought any other form of data collection would take away from informants' more detailed explanations. Further, I expected that I would not find enough informants to use a quantitative research method, so I chose a semi-structured interview to obtain my research data. Semi-structured interview method was chosen because it's possible to ask additional questions that might not have been identified when first constructing the survey (Gideon & Moskos, 2012, 112–113). According to Roberts (2020), having broad and open interview questions is especially important for unexperienced interviewers. Since the informants and their backgrounds were very different, I anticipated that a semi-structured interview would not only give me more freedom to ask follow-up questions based on informants' background and experiences but also help me to stay on the topic and to obtain more cohesive data as a first-time interviewer.

For choosing my informants, I used the non-probability research method, and more specifically a purposive sampling. With purposive sampling, the aim is to select features relevant to the research and understanding a specific phenomenon (Tajik et al., 2024). Since the purpose of my study was to research how Finnish employees adapt to Korean workplace culture, I chose specific features and cases that needed to be fulfilled for the informants to participate in my study. The informants had to be Finnish and have at least one previous long-term work experience in Korea, which already limited my sampling quite a bit, so I decided not to choose any other features besides these.

Finally, I chose the thematic analysis as a method to analyze my data. With thematic analysis (TA), it is possible to identify and analyze specific patterns or themes within qualitative data. Further, themes help researcher with organizing and reporting observations from the data. (Clarke & Braun, 2017.) Since I could not be completely sure about what themes would arise from the interviews, thematic analysis made it possible to be flexible. Moreover, thematic analysis fits well for research that aims to understand participants' experiences, views or perspective (Clarke & Braun, 2017), which was the purpose of my study. Also, thematic analysis can be used with small datasets (Clarke & Braun, 2017), so the method was suitable to use in my study with five informants.

3.1 Data collection process

My data collection process went as follows. First, I asked couple of university professors who have connections to Korea if they know people who are currently working or have worked in Korea. Through the president of Finland–Republic of Korea Association I got five contacts, four of them I was able to contact through email and one though LinkedIn. Two of them answered and agreed to participate in my study. Further, I contacted three influencers living in Korea through Instagram, however, none of them answered. One of them I also tried to contact through email. After three weeks I was able to get into one Facebook group meant for Finnish people working in Korea. I wrote a post into the group asking if people working in Korea would join my thesis interviews, two people answered and agreed to participate. I later shared the post again and one other person agreed to join. Through LinkedIn, I contacted one more person that my supervisor had suggested, however, they did not answer. I also contacted Embassy of Finland in Korea but did not get any answer. In the end, I had found five informants who agreed to participate in the interviews. Unfortunately, due to time restrictions, I could not search any more informants, but I was happy at least 5 people had answered me and agreed to participate in the interviews.

Kallio (2016) recommend in their literature review that to make sure collected data is trustworthy, a semi-structured interview should be developed using specific steps that include using previous knowledge to create a base for interviews, conducting a pilot test to make sure the quality of questions is good, and assessing one's ability to interview. I followed these previously mentioned steps to guarantee the validity and quality of my data. I formed the interview questionnaire as follows. First, I went through previous research regarding foreign employees integrating to foreign countries and workplaces. I then tried to distinguish essential themes from the previous research, as well as think about the time limitation and the scope of my own research. Further, while considering the themes and questions for my interview questionnaire, I reflected to the Finnish and Korean workplace cultures. In the end I came up with six themes: 1) willingness to adapt, 2) work time and work-life balance, 3) career opportunities, 4) hierarchy and communication, 5) conflict, and 6) equality. Each theme included questions, 23 main questions, and sub-questions that I used if appropriate. The Interview Questionnaire can be found in Appendix 4.

The number of interview questions that I wanted to ask was high, so I decided to include a Pre-Questionnaire into the Consent Form to be sent to the informants beforehand. The Pre-Questionnaire can be found in Appendix 1 and Consent Form in Appendix 2. The Pre-Questionnaire helped me to gain answers to some basic questions about the informants' background as well as get some insight

into their work situation. By doing this, I did not have to use time to gain some basic information, so I was able to focus on the actual interview questions during the interviews. Further, I do think I was able to ask better follow-up questions, since I already had some understanding about the informants' workplace and position. Informants also signed an Informed Consent Form, before the interview. Since recording an interview should be disclosed by using a signed "informed consent form" (Gideon & Moskos, 2012, 113–114), I also asked permission to audio and video-record the interviews. Before the interviews the informants were also sent a Participant Information Sheet, that can be found in Appendix 3. The information Sheet was used to explain the nature of the interview, possible risk and benefits, use of data, possibility of withdrawing from the interview, confidentiality, and so on. The interview questionnaire, pre-questionnaire, participant information sheet, and the consent form were checked by my thesis supervisor.

Before the interviews, I conducted a pilot interview, since it's important to modify questions based on what works and what doesn't (Roberts, 2020). After the pilot interview I edited some questions to further obtain more detailed information during interviews. In the pilot interview, I noticed how important it is to listen carefully what the informants are saying rather than focus on next question or questions you should ask. Since this was my first time conducting an interview, I used some time to further think about possible answers informants might give to my questions, and follow-up questions, to be able to better focus on just listening the informants.

I conducted the interviews between March and May in 2025. First, at the beginning of 2025, I contacted the informants again asking about preferred interview date and time, and whether they would like to participate on the interviews face to face in Korea or through Zoom. After agreeing with specific arrangements, I sent the pre-questionnaire and consent forms to the informants to fill in, around one week before each interview. First, I interviewed two informants online through Zoom platform while being in Finland, and then three other informants face-to-face in South Korea. Information about the informants can be found from Table 4. I used the Zoom recorder for interviews in Zoom, and a voice recorder for face-to-face interviews. The interviews were conducted in Finnish, the native language of both the informants and me. I chose to conduct the interviews in Finnish so there would be no language barrier, but the informants could express their ideas more comfortably in their native language. By using Finnish language, the informants could describe their feelings and experiences in a more authentic way. Further, informants' use of figure of speech, metaphors or slang words probably not only helped them to describe their ideas and feelings better but also helped me to get more out of their answers.

Overall, the interviews went well, despite some challenges. Even though the informants had filled out the Pre-Questionnaire and the Consent Form, and read the Information Sheet, I went through some of the information again before starting the interviews. Participants have a right to say things "off the record" (Gideon & Moskos, 2012, 113–114), so I informed the participants about their right to withdraw answers or answer outside the record. All informants were very eager to talk about their experiences, and most of the interviews ended up being longer than expected, around 1 hour 10 minutes to 1 hour 30 minutes. I did let the informants know we had used the time reserved for the interview, but some informants were happy to speak longer.

Roberts (2020) states that after an interview it's good to take notion of aspects like one's body language, emotions, things that were unexpected or challenging, possible ideas that rose during the interview, and reflect whether it seemed like participant was able to share. Thus, after each interview, I wrote down my thought on how the interview had gone, and what ideas came to my mind. To conclude my thought, I felt it was harder to connect with informants online. Also, since the online interviews were the first interviews I did, I felt like the interviews were stiffer and more structured compared to the face-to-face interviews. In face-to-face interviews, it was easier for me to connect with the informants, the flow of the conversation was better, and the informants were more expressive, which I think are some benefits of face-to-face interviews. In contrast, having an interview in a public place might face affected what informants want to talk about. Informants who had their interview from home or in a closed office space might have felt more relaxed to talk about more challenging topics. However, the interviews were in Finnish, which I also think helped other informants feel more at ease talking about work related issues. With one online interview, the audio quality was not good because of the background noise, so I had to listen the recording carefully and edit some parts of the audio transcription. Further, in the face-to-face interviews that were conducted in informants' chosen places, some recordings also picked up some background noises even in quiet cafes, which affected the transcription. However, after the interviews I went through, checked, and edited all the audio transcripts manually.

3.2 Data Analysis

After the interviews, I used University of Turku's auto-transcription software to transcribe the audios into text form. Before starting the data analysis, I had to go through three rounds of editing the audio transcripts to make them easier to read and to ensure the confidentiality of my informants. Since the auto-transcription software did not do any format editing after transcribing the audios, I first had to go through all the transcripts and edit the format and make it better readable. After this, I went through

the transcripts again and edited any names, places, or other detailed descriptions by using pseudonyms or simply deleting some information the informants had hoped wouldn't be mentioned in my research. By doing this, I could make sure the data on my thesis could no longer be connected to my informants. Finally, I translated relevant transcripts from Finnish into English to analyze the data more easily.

After editing the interview transcripts, I was ready to start analyzing the obtained data. To better use thematic analysis in my research, study by Nowell et al. (2017) offered some helpful guidelines in using thematic analysis as a research method. In the study, Nowell et al. (2017) have created a practical list of phases of the thematic analysis and how to establish trustworthiness in each phase during thematic analysis. First, I familiarized myself with the data e.g. all the interview transcripts, through which I was already able to recognize some themes based on my previous research about the topic. Then I moved into generating initial themes by identifying and highlighting them from the text. This part was rather easily as I had already identified initial themes during my literature review and while constructing the semi-structured questionnaire for the interviews. I decided to analyze the data manually by using color-codes, so I went through the interview transcripts and colored each section that responded to the color of a theme. For example, I color-coded theme 'hierarchy' as orange in each interview transcript. I chose this method because my sample was rather small, and I had not used thematic analysis before, so I thought this method would be more suitable for my research and my skills.

Initial themes that I defined and used as a guidance during my interviews were 1) willingness to adapt, 2) hierarchy, 3) work time and work-life balance, 4) career opportunities 5) hierarchy and communication, 6) conflicts, and 7) equality. However, these initial themes ended up changing as I went through my data and reflect only on the interview data rather than previous research. Nowell et al. (2017) research brings up how prior research and its' link to the data can affect the themes, which is why it's a good idea to use inductive analysis e.g. coding the data without trying to fit it into preexisting coding frame. In the coding process, the codes represent the responses the subjects have given to interview questions, and codes can be grouped and connected to themes, which can be then used to analyze subjective data (Coates et al., 2021). Thus, in the second phase, I focused on searching for codes, e.g. defining phrases and preliminary codes from the data, and creating the final themes based on the codes (Saldaña, 2009, 19). Since the aim of my study was to analyze what aspects might ease and what challenge Finnish employees' adaptation to South Korean workplaces, I also connected the key words and sentences to plus and minus signs. Using the marking, plus (eases adaptation) and minus (challenges adaptation), helped me to see whether codes have positive or negative influence

on adaption and further reflect the results on previous research. Example codes and equivalent themes can be found from the Table 3 below.

Table 3. Examples of codes and equivalent themes.

Raw Data	**Preliminary Codes**	**Final Themes**
"I think it's really important (to adapt), cause I spend there almost my whole day and week there at the workplace." *"At that age you don't really change anything anymore."* *"I'm not going to please anyone if I want to survive here."*	Wanting to adapt to a workplace where one will spend a lot of times + Individual values, habits, and purpose of stay –	Willingness to adapt
"They do take it as a positive thing there at the workplace that I speak Korean, and they also give those types of tasks for me." *"We had two interpreters."* *"If Korean doesn't understand something they can't or won't usually ask, but I can repeat and ask because my Korean language skills are not perfect."*	Able to speak Korean: work tasks +, forgiveness in some situations + Not able to speak Korean: Interpretors +, getting through challenging situations –	Korean language skills
"I had like a local colleague I could trust." *"I have gotten to know all types of things of how Korean working culture can be through my partner."* *"They (other foreign workers) are also in the same situation with me, so they cannot really help me."*	Local social connections + Foreign/Finnish connections +/-	Social networks and support
"I just automatically got an entrance to the organization and managing the company." *"I don't have to stay there waiting that my boss leaves first."* *"Overall, it (hierarchy) is not an issue in an international environment."*	Upper management: self-determination +, kinship of Korean employees – Regular employee: organizational culture +/–, Korean workplace –, international workplace +	Perceived hierarchy
"When you are the CEO, it's a lot easier, cause you can talk to everyone. *"All communication will have to circle through someone anyway. I cannot go like straight up (in the hierarchy)."* *"It's the manager that's the only person who you can talk to."*	Upper management: communicating freely + Regular employee: Restrictions and rules in communication in Korean workplaces –	Communication

Raw Data	Preliminary Codes	Final Themes
"They don't want to betray a member of a group." *"The relationships between those (Korean) people, they are so strong that a European like me is almost always a bystander."* *"If nothing else, I do try to circle around the topic to express my opinion."*	Upper management: kinship of Korean employees –, in charge of solving conflicts + Regular employee: Not able to express opinions in conflict situations –	Conflict situations
"We went to holidays as we were supposed to and we left home during workdays in reasonable hours, us Europeans." *"I kept my month-long holiday in Finland so that I was reachable the whole time. But it didn't bother me."* *"In Finland I would take a sick leave. In here I will wear a mask and come to work."*	European and Nordic firms + Personal characteristics and preferences +/– Short yearly holidays and lack of sick leaves in Korean workplaces –	Work-life balance
"Well it shows in many different ways, that it really is men's culture in many ways." *"I feel like I have been taken along to things that are not related to my role at work at all. They take me along because I'm a foreigner."* *"I have been surprised how many women we have, in like big roles. My supervisor is a woman, my sectional chief is a woman, we have a lot of women working."*	Upper management: issues regarding equality – European and Nordic firms more equal + Female dominant workplaces: possibly better benefits and opportunities + Foreigner: unrelated work tasks –, not being corrected in a workplace –	Equality
"Advancing in your career is very hard." *"Salary is kind of a tabu. I think I have even been said not to talk about salary with other people."*	Future opportunities and advancing in one's career – Salary +/–	Future prospectives and salary

After the coding phase, I had each theme and text corresponding to each theme written out on my thesis. However, I noticed some of the data did not seem to fit into any theme, but I followed guidelines (Nowell et al., 2017), that mention it is good to not regard any information but to see if some information helps create more detailed background for one's research. Finally, I read through the interview transcripts again and reviewed whether each answer the informant gave really matched with the theme. After reviewing, I did some changes to initial themes and renamed some of them. For example, even though hierarchy and communication go hand in hand, hierarchy was too large of a theme even as its' own, so I decided to divide the theme into two separate ones. Further, I ended up

changing the name of work time and work-life balance theme to just a work-life balance, because I realized work time as itself was not too relevant in my research. Eventually, I was left with final set of themes as follows: 1) Willingness to adapt, 2) Korean language skills and adaptation, 3) Social networks and support 4) Perceived hierarchy 5) Communication, 6) Conflict situations, 7) Work-life balance, 8) Equality, and 9) Future prospectives and salary. I wanted to add themes about future prospectives and salary, as well as advice for future Finnish employees, even though these themes were rather small. However, these themes might result in some future research or work as an advice for people who want to work in Korea.

3.3 Research limitations

Next, I discuss about the research limitations regarding chosen methods and being an inexperienced researcher. This is my first time conducting qualitative research, so I'm aware there might be aspects that I have not been able to acknowledge as a researcher. But I have done my best to familiarize myself with different qualitative research methods to make informed choices. Regarding thematic analysis, one thing to consider is that while thematic analysis is flexible, it can also lead to inconsistency and lack of coherence when developing themes (Holloway & Todres, 2003). For future note, it would be better to consider the time and scope of the project, as I wish I would have chosen fewer themes for my research to obtain more detailed and thoughtful information from my informants. Even though I had thought of initial themes and interview questions related to the themes based on previous research, I felt like I could have asked even more precise and accurate questions, if I did not have so many themes. Moreover, the literature that outlines the process for conducting trustworthy thematic analysis is not quite sufficient yet (Nowell et al., 2017). Indeed, at times I found thematic analysis rather challenging and abstract to work with. In the final round of developing themes, I found myself questioning chosen themes, since many of them were naturally overlapping. For example, I kept thinking if it's necessary to separate hierarchy theme from communication and conflict theme. Also, communication theme of course overlaps with language skills theme. However, create more coherent and detailed themes, I decided to create more themes instead of fewer big themes.

While purposive sampling offers advantages like ability to target information-rich cases, it is often criticized for its lack of generalizability and susceptibility to researcher bias (Tajik et al., 2024). However, the purpose of this study was indeed not to generalize the research results but to examine individual experiences and challenges Finnish people face while trying to adapt to workplaces in Korean. Thus, I would argue that the sampling method and sample size were sufficient for this master's thesis and conducting interviews and research in a timely manner. Regarding researcher bias,

since I have background living in Korea, and I have heard quite a lot about Korean work life, I tried to distance myself and my experiences from the informants' experiences during the interviews. Roberts (2020) mentions, it is important to not have expectations that might influence the interviews and the information one obtains. So, I tried to conduct the interviews as neutrally as possible without letting my expectations lead the conversation. However, as I'm an inexperienced interviewer, I might have unconsciously act in way that might have compromised my research data. For example, I might have not been fully able to conduct the interviews without any leading questions.

According to Gideon & Moskos (2012), the use of open-ended questions might increase the amount of irrelevant information and direct the interview away from the purpose of the research. To avoid this, correct vocabulary and concepts should be used, and interview questions should be precise and understandable. Further, asking irrelevant questions might reduce obtaining relevant information and decreased the credibility of results (Roberts, 2020). At times, I did feel like because all informants had very different backgrounds, I accidentally asked irrelevant questions. When that happened, I let the informant know that a question might not be relevant for them, and we could skip to next question, or I changed the question to better fit the informant's situation. Dodgson & Trotman (2022) discuss about challenges in interview-based surveys including challenges that exist when interview participants share insufficient insights or explanations, which I also noticed was rather hard for me to navigate at times. When informants at times listed multiple interesting aspects or it was hard for me to interrupt and ask follow-up questions, it was hard to analyze the data without enough context or insight to what a participant had said.

The interviews were conducted in Finnish, which I believe is one advantage of my interviews. I did my best to translate the interviews as accurately as possible. However, since I am not a translator, the English translations from the interviews might not fully reflect the things said in Finnish language. Moreover, However, most of the interviews were conducted face-to-face that helped me to get to know my informants on a more personal level and interview them in casual way. However, since it was harder to connect with the informants through online interviews, that were also the first ones I conducted, it might be that I was not able to conduct those interviews as well as the rest of the interviews.

It is important to note that individual characteristics and personalities can affect the way one adapts to a new culture or workplace. Moreover, as can be seen from the interview data, informants' experiences varied greatly depending on their position at workplace. Thus, these results should not be generalized to all Finnis people, as they only reflect individuals' subjective experiences. Further,

I would like to emphasize that since there is only handful of Finnish people working in Korea and I promised confidentiality to the informants, I will not discuss about informants' ages, sex, jobs descriptions, or any other detailed information that might reveal them. Nevertheless, I hope that this study will inspire further research on Finnish or Nordic employees and their adaption to South Korean workplace culture in relation to cultural differences. In the future, I would suggest the employees would be divided into separate categories based on their job position to obtain more detailed and reliable data.

3.4 Ethical considerations

Before the interviews I contacted the IT department at University to Turku to make sure I was obtaining and storing the data according to safety instructions. University VPN connection was used both in online and face-to-face interviews. Further, UTU Zoom was used in online interviews. Voice and video recordings from the interviews were only stored in my computer and phone momentarily till I transcribed the audios into text form. After this, the recordings were deleted from both Zoom and the recording app, and the transcript texts were moved into University of Turku's Seafile system, which is secure and can only be accessed through Multi Factor Authentication. Moreover, emails and messages with the informants in different platforms were deleted. All informants were given a pseudonym (letters), excluding one informant who wanted to use their own name and gave me a separate permission for this.

Informants were informed about the nature of the research, confidentiality and anonymity, as well as informants' rights by using the Participant Information Sheet before the interviews. Further, they were informed about their choice to withdraw from the interview or withhold the use of their interview or parts of the interview data at any point. Informed Consent Form was used to get written permission to obtain data from the informants and to make sure the research is transparent. Some aspect like anonymity, possibility to withdraw or not answer, and data handling after the interview were also reviewed again before the interviews.

4 Background

This background section further examines history and characteristics of Finnish and Korean organizational and national cultures, as well as the market structure and organizational practices. All these aspects should be considered when trying to understand research results obtained from this study.

4.1 Perceived differences between East and West

Differences between East and West have been reflected to date back to Confucian teachings. I discuss about aspects related to Confucianism in the modern South Korean work culture, like Confucian influence in forming the hierarchical structure of South Korean companies. Nevertheless, we should not oversimplify the differences between East and West, as the areas are geographically wide and consist of many different societies, cultures, languages, and historical backgrounds. Hofstede et al. (2010) argues that teachings of Confucius can still be seen in East Asian societies in rules and daily lives of people. Confucius was a Chinese intellectual that lived around 500 B.C. teaching ethics without a religious content. His daily rules emphasize the inequality of relationships that guarantee the stability of the society. Family was seen as one important representative of this inequal order. Daily rules emphasized the importance of being polite and treating others like one would like to be treated themselves. Education and working hard were some other highly valued rules. (Hofstede et al., 2010, 237–238.) According to Nielsen & Helgesen (2012), historically, Western societies have been searching for the truth, meanwhile Chinese philosophers have been searching for harmony. And, even though preserving harmony along with truth is common in West, in China there is more emphasis on the feelings of people and situational context. Meanwhile Western traditions emphasize the idea of equality, even in the case of being punished for being guilty of something, in East Asia, traditional hierarchical relationships, social norms, and skills are seen as the foundation of the society. In West, people who behave similarly in all situations are commonly respected, unlike in East, where Confucian social roles define individuals. Social roles define how to behave and behaving the same in all situations can be regarded as lack of social roles and lack of knowledge on how to behave in various situations. (Nielsen & Helgesen, 2012, 18–20.)

4.2 Nordic values and organizational culture

Finnish women participated in parliamentary elections already in 1906 (Nousiainen, 2024, 73). In international comparison, Finnish work culture has been seen to emphasize equality from the

beginning of the 19th century (Ylöstalo, 2007). Nordic countries have organized their welfare systems and labor markets in a way that increases equality through welfare policies, social protection, and low-income inequalities. Nordic countries continuously rank high in aspects like work satisfaction, productivity, social equity, and work-related health. Nordic countries also tend to have both higher life and job satisfaction, in which, job security plays an especially important role. (Torp & Reiersen, 2020.) Moreover, same laws and labor agreements apply to both Finnish and foreign employees working in Finland (FIOH, 2014, 17–18). Some aspects that might have helped to create an equal society are women's representation in politics and Finnish language and its' gender-neutrality (Nousiainen, 2024, 73). Due to the small size of Finland, women have also had a long and strong presence in labor markets (Nousiainen, 2024, 119).

Perhaps the most talked about characteristics of Finnish society are gender equality and work-life balance. According to publication on Nordic equality by OECD (The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development) (2018), Nordic countries have a common goal to engage both men and women equally in the labor market through initiatives and public policies. Even though some issues, like persistent small pay gap and women's unpaid work, remain also in Nordic countries, they are nevertheless closer to eliminating gender labor market gab than most other countries. Nordic countries support families with children for example through paid leave and early childhood education and care to ensure both men and women's participation in labor markets and full-time employment. Paid leaves help mothers to spend time with their small children but also keep their paid employment. (OECD, 2018.) Employer must arrange for example flexible working hours if the employee wants to take a partial childcare leave to take care of their small child. Further, if a child under 10 falls ill, parent can take temporary care leave to stay home for maximum 4 days. (FIOH (2014, 55–59.) In general, Nordic countries display higher level of social trust, like countries with low-income inequality tend to display (Torp & Reiersen, 2020).

In Nordic countries work-life balance is greatly valued, and it has surfaced on media throughout the years. Working Hours Act and collective labor agreement regulate employees' working hours, and the maximum working time is around 8 hours per day or 40 hours per week. Sometimes flexibility is needed but overtime work must always be compensated with a pay or paid leave. (FIOH, 2014, 55–59.) However, it is not common for employees to work overtime but only the time stated in the contract. Moreover, it is seen that to work efficiently employees need rest at times. Employees have to have 11 hours free time between shifts. Further, full workday usually includes one 30-minute lunch break and 1–2 coffee breaks. (InfoFinland.fi, 2024.) Further, the Annual Holidays Act regulates one's

holiday days during a year, and when on holiday, employee is not obligated to work even though employer would request it. (FIOH, 2014, 55–59). Since regular working hours cannot not exceed 8 hours a day and holidays in Finland are generally rather long, maintaining a work-life balance is easier than in many other countries. Sick leave can be taken if employee falls ill, in which case employee will be paid if they have been employed at least one month (FIOH (2014, 39–40). There's also a temporary leave that the employee has a right to take in case of accident or illnesses in their family. Through these rights, employees are guaranteed that they can keep working even when their situation changes due to family or sickness (FIOH, 2014, 55–59). Finnish workplaces rarely have recreational or off-work recreational activities, but occasionally recreational activities are held to increase employees job satisfaction and bring a change to days (InfoFinland.fi, 2024). In Finland, education is valued, and it is common to re-educate oneself and update ones' skills so there are often separate courses that allow employees to update their knowledge and skills (Peda.net, 2017a).

In general, Finnish work culture is low in hierarchy. In Finland it is common to use first names and refer to one's employer or boss as "you". The difference between an employer and employees for example in wage or size of the room does not differ much. It is less common that an employer could be recognized from outside matters. (Peda.net, 2017b.) In Finnish workplaces supervisors are usually very approachable and it's not uncommon to have women and younger people in supervisorial positions. Moreover, supervisors have a role to support their employees, so employees are often expected to tell their supervisor about problems or development ideas regarding workplaces or their work. Trust and independency are some important values in Finnish workplaces. Employees are trusted and responsibility is given to them and their work, meaning supervisors will not oversee subordinates' work continuously. It's also common that employees are expected to develop their own working methods. (FIOH, 2014, 43–51.) I indeed, according to European Working Condition Survey, as much as 82 % of workers in Nordic countries feel that they have control over choosing their working methods, which is higher than in other countries. Nordic workers feel they can participate in decision-making processes, take initiative, and use problem-solving abilities to be an active participant at their workplaces (Torp & Reiersen, 2020.) Indeed, research shows that in Finland, the contents of work are valued more than the salary (Ylöstalo, 2007, 24).

Transparency and honesty are greatly valued in Finland. Transparency International (2023) shows Finland ranking 2nd on the corruption perceptions index, in contrast to Korea ranking 32nd. When issues arise in Finnish workplaces, honesty and frankness is valued, but it is expected that thoughts are expressed in a considerate manner. (InfoFinland.fi, 2024.) In Finland, around 70% of workers

participate in trade unions (Torp & Reiersen, 2020). Finnish trade unions can also help in case that the employee faces issues with the employer. In Finnish workplaces, the law is on employees' side and labor union can be contacted for example when working hours are not respected, in which case the issue will be solved, and employer will have to comply with the agreement. (Työelämänpelisäännöt.fi, 2025.) Overall, the law requires employer to intervene in cases of any type of harassment at workplace. This includes socially isolating someone, badmouthing or yelling, withdrawing information about work or not inviting someone to meeting or taking tasks from someone without a reason. In situations like these employees can talk to the supervisor or supervisor's supervisor. Moreover, there is possibility to contact Regional State Administrative Agency's occupational safety official. The Non-Discrimination Act and the Act on Equality between Women and Men are prohibit any type of discrimination and its employer's responsibility by the law to prevent discrimination on basis of sex or other characteristics. (FIOH, 2014, 43–51.)

Collaboration and good relationships with other employees are also valued in Finnish workplaces, and misunderstanding are expected to be cleared up, and people are expected to follow good practices and behavior. Conscientiousness and diligence are valued, and Finnish people appreciate working efficiently, so it's common to go straight to the point for example at meetings. (InfoFinland.fi, 2024.) Further, when something is agreed on, it's important to go through with it (FIOH, 2014, 43–51). Punctuality and arriving on a timely manner are also valued at workplaces, like in Finland in general (InfoFinland.fi, 2024). In Finnish workplaces it is not common to give out gifts. Only on special days like marriage or retirement it is common to buy a small present or flowers to the person in question. (InfoFinland.fi, 2024.)

4.3 History of Korean organizational culture and hierarchy

Next, I discuss about the modern Korean organizational culture by reflecting on the book *Making Capitalism: The Social and Cultural Construction of a South Korean Conglomerate* (1993) by Janelli to gain a deeper understanding on how modern Korean workplace culture has come to exist. Even though the book will not be able to fully explain the historical legacy of organizational culture, it can offer a glimpse on what's behind the modern organizational practices of Korean companies. The book focuses on white-collar personnel in one of South Korea's largest company named "Taesong". It examines industrial elite and the new middle class of the time in the context of capitalist industrialization. Moreover, it examines Korea's cultural transformation and how privileged parties have advanced their own interests through culturally informed choices when transitioning to

capitalism. It is described in the book how owner-managers in “Taesong” were very engaged with white-collar employees for example by trying to influence their subordinates’ views. To make company ideologies resonate with employees, the managers emphasized some themes that are rooted in symbols, traditions, and ideas that represent Korean culture and identity. The managers adopted an idea that their business benefits national welfare. (Janelli, 1993, 106).

Organizational cultures are not only socially constructed but they are also determined by history (Hofstede et al., 2010, 344). Similarly, Janelli (1993) emphasizes that the population in Seoul went through a fast urbanization which meant that large number of people migrated to urban centers, meanwhile their backgrounds and rural lives were reflected at “Taesong” and its’ practices (Janelli, 1993, 20–21). Janelli (1993) argues that rural Korean culture and social institutions at that time can be seen in current organizational practices in many ways, and it is not uncommon to explain managerial practices and control through tradition. First, fathers’ control over family can be seen as an explanation of managers control over their subordinates. Second, harmony in the family relationships correlates with the demand for harmony in the company. Thirdly, seniority-based salary and promotion system stems from the importance of age between family relationships, like for example the father-son relationship. (Janelli, 1993, 23.) Moreover, the research argues that most likely through formal education, schools have had a great impact on company practices as relationship practices expanded from family relationships to consider also relationships between non-family members. Teachers had control over students like in family relationships parents had control over their children. At schools, students were accustomed to one-way communication style and an age-ranking system. The age ranking system was a base for social ties and social grouping that often continued even after graduation. Later terms like “seonbae” (선배) and “hubae” (후배) were used to emphasize the hierarchical order between co-workers. (Janelli, 1993, 44–47.) Along with schooling, army service had a great impact on company practices. Military culture and practices like a ranking system and chain of command can be seen in the modern South Korean society, especially in the state bureaucracy and businesses. In practice, emphasis on unified chain of command meant that autonomy at lower levels of organization was suppressed and the top-down management of businesses was common. Japanese colonial rule over Korea also influenced Korean military and business practices. Furthermore, as individuals accustomed into urban life, they most likely became used to surveillance and settings with clear boundaries. (Janelli, 1993, 48–49.)

The book, by Janelli (1993), also describes how personnel practices were used to make subordinates obey the authority and redevelop the cultural understanding of social relationships and harmony and

well as authority at “Taesong” (Janelli, 1993, 134). At “Taesong” obeying authority in practical situation was measured for example during training program with giving employee candidates seemingly impossible tasks and seeing whether they followed the orders and did their best without questioning or refusing to go through those tasks (Janelli, 1993, 142). Moreover, individual divisions held weekly managers’ meetings, in which each week’s work efforts and accomplishment were reported. Active reporting was one way of controlling subordinates (Janelli, 1993, 156). Managers’ methods of control during the week were more subtle (Janelli, 1993, 162). For example, seating arrangements were controlled so that sections chiefs and department head were placed so that they had a clear view over their subordinates throughout the day. Section chiefs were positioned so close to subordinates that they could hear what was said and see whether employees were working conscientiously. Further, each department head was positioned behind sections chiefs. (Janelli, 1993, 164.) In the weekly meetings, seats were also arranged by rank and position (Janelli, 1993, 157). Ranking could be seen in the arrangement of desks, and what type of chairs and equipment were used. For example, department heads often had armrests and better equipment unlike their subordinates. Moreover, it was common that the person with a highest ranking went to the elevator first. Body language was also important, for example giving and receiving documents with two hands. It was essential that employees took notice of these rules around company culture and adapted their behavior to it. (Janelli, 1993, 165–167.) Dismissing employees due to a mental or physical obstacles and inferior work results were some of the reasons that kept employees on their toes and complied with the company. There was also a thread of losing attractive benefits the companies offered. (Janelli, 1993, 152.)

At “Taesong” employees accepted long working hours as time was seen as something to use for social demands of the village or a family, rather than an individual right (Janelli, 1993, 209). Even though official workday usually ended around 6 on weekdays, it was common for employees to stay at the office till 7–9 completing their daily tasks (Janelli, 1993, 165–166). Working 6 hours during Saturday and Sunday and even working hour or two extra on top of that was rather common. In addition, around 3–8 hours a week was spent on socializing. (Janelli, 1993, 205.) While spending time with family and friends decreased, it was emphasized how important it is to be involved and identify with the company, even outside the official working hours (Janelli, 1993, 178). Working hours at “Taesong” were seen unreasonable and even discussed in media frequently (Janelli, 1993, 204–205). Employees who were not eager to work long hours were not seen as hard workers or committed to the company (Janelli, 1993, 207).

Many recreation activities that included eating and drinking, hiking, picnics or visiting saunas were organized at different levels of the organization. These activities were seen as an important part of social relations; thus, employees were expected to participate in them. It was also common that on special occasions, like weddings and funerals, the whole division was invited to someone's house. (Janelli, 1993, 173–174.) Recreations were also a moment when people could communicate and interact in a more relaxed manner and forget formalities as well as interpersonal conflicts at the workplace (Janelli, 1993, 175. Even though subordinates were often reserved and wanted to avoid argumentations with their managers (Janelli 1993, 176), superiors were criticized among trusted employees and friends (Janelli, 1993, 203).

At the time Janelli (1993) examined "Taesong" and its' practices, many South Korean companies emphasized principles of harmony, solidarity, and cooperation as the managerial ideology (Janelli, 1993, 115). In "Taesong" the personnel were often regarded as family and even addressed as family members in gatherings. Woman workers were often seen as family's youngest daughter as women tended to be younger than their male colleagues. (Janelli, 1993, 118–119.) Over 15 years later, the research by Hosftede et al. (2010, 120) also mentions that the dynamics between employer and employees in South Korea were described more like a family relationship in which obligations and loyalty play an important role (Hofstede et al. 2010, 120). However, many employees at "Taesong" did not come into terms with the metaphor of family, and they did indeed complain about company issues, like long working hours (Janelli, 1993, 134).

At "Taesong", it was a common perception that good personal relationships help to achieve work-related goals and that conflicts with superiors and coworkers should be suppressed (Janelli, 1993, 221–222). Tasks given to subordinates were clearly defined by superiors and the focus was on accomplishing set goals. However, the employees were often assigned tasks with insufficient information and expected to complete them without an opportunity to ask clarification as they would seem incompetent and it could affect their chance to be promoted (Janelli, 1993, 212–213). Subordinates had no room to experiment with their own ideas and creativity was limited by the need to complete tasks (Janelli, 1993, 165–166).

4.4 Dual labor market and equality

To discuss about organizational cultures and adaptation, we must also understand the characteristics of South Korean labor market as work culture is likely to differ between big companies and public sector, and small and medium-sized enterprises. South Korean labor market could be classified as a

dual labor market that is highly gendered and there is a distinctive division between regular and irregular labor markets. Labor market dualism and its' negative effects result in non-regular workers having poorer social safety net, uncertain employment status, higher turnover. Non-regular workers also receive less training which results in them not being able to advance in their careers. Moreover, non-regular workers are less likely to marry and raise children due to low income and insecure employment situation that discourages people from starting families. (Jones & Fukawa, 2016.) When we look at the statistics on incidence on low and high pay in 2022, 8.9 % of workers earned less than two-thirds of median earning in Finland when in Korea the number was 16.9 %. In Korea the number was still as high as 23.5 % in 2016. (OECD, 2025c.)

Many non-regular workers fail to move from non-regular worker's position into a regular worker (Jones & Fukawa, 2016). The probability of moving from temporary to permanent employment over a one-year period was only 11.1%, in comparison to over 50% in a number of European countries (OECD, 2013b). Indeed, companies prefer to hire non-regular workers rather than allowing their current non-regular workers to become regular workers because companies as companies try to reduce the cost of labor. Despite this, non-regular workers often work on same jobs and tasks as regular workers. (Jones & Fukawa, 2016.) Regarding temporary employment in Korea, in 2022 around 19.06 % of age group of 24–54 years-old had temporary jobs, among 55–64 years-olds temporary employment increases to 34.42 %, and among people 65 and older the number was as high as 70 %. The contrasting numbers in Finland were 14.06 %, 9,56 %, and 39.99 %, respectively. (OECD, 2025e.) In 2023, part-time employment rate in Finland was 11.5 % for men and 19.7 % for women. In comparison, OECD average for men was 8.2 % and for women 22.5 %, and in Korea men's part-time employment rate was 8 % and women's 18.4 %. (OECD, 2025d.) Interestingly, when we look at the employment rate by age group, we can see that 71.23 % of people aged 55–64 were employed in Finland when in Korea the rate was 68.78 % (OECD, 2025b).

Meanwhile SMEs are less likely to survive than bigger companies and they are overall less productive, they account for 90 % of employment in the service sector and 81 % in manufacturing sector. Moreover, small and medium size enterprises cannot offer as attractive conditions or high wages as larger firms or jobs in the public sector. Even though the condition of Korean labor market is better than in many OECD countries, Korea has many jobs that require low skills and not much education, and most of those jobs are also low-quality jobs. (OECD, 2019.) In fact, Korea first began bringing labor into the country to tackle the lack of manual labor, since manual jobs do not pay as well as white-collar jobs, and they are not as prestigious as other jobs (Kim, 2009, 88).

Finally, the gender pay gap remains a big issue in Korean labor markets. Gender pay gap in Finland was 17.5 in 2022, above OECD average of 11.4 % of median earning of men. In Korea the number was 31.2 in 2022 and 29.3 in 2023. (OECD, 2025a). Hijzen (2023) discusses about gender wage gap and the role of firms in OECD countries, mentioning different reasons for gender wage gap. According to the study, women working in low-wage firms and industries can be a result of multiple factors, for example, women are more likely to be chosen to firms that offer flexible working arrangements with often also lower salaries. Further, women dominated industries are likely to be less valued. (Hijzen, 2023.) In Korea, women often work in low-paying industries like the service sector (Fluchtmann & Patrini, 2023). According to Hijzen (2023), differences in wages between women and men largely result from differences between responsibilities and tasks within firms rather than women being paid less for similar tasks. However, important notion is that among childbirth that often leads to significant wage losses for women, women are also more likely to work part-time, thus they are less likely to be promoted which further results in gender wage gap increasing throughout years working. Lee & Kim (2020) also argues that gender pay gap in Korea is a result of dual labor market and gendered division between irregular and regular jobs. In other words, women often end up doing irregular work because they are unable to keep their position in companies after having children. Fluchtmann & Patrini (2023) also state that traditional gender roles remain a big reason for women not being able to work full-time as work and family life are not easy to combine. Moreover, the public spending for family benefits in Finland was 2.9 % of GDP in 2019, above average of OECD countries' 2.1 %. Meanwhile in Korea, financial support for families and children was 1.4 % of GDP in 2019. (OECD, 2025f.)

5 Findings

After the final coding round, I was left with following themes: 1) Willingness to adapt, 2) Korean language skills and adaptation, 3) Social networks and support 4) Perceived hierarchy 5) Communication, 6) Conflict situations, 7) Work-life balance, 8) Equality, and 9) Future prospectives and salary. In this chapter, I go through the data obtained from the interviews each theme at a time. Further, I reflect informants' experiences on adapting to previous literature and theoretical framework related to cultural differences and adaptation theories. Even though these results cannot be generalized as they are, I aim to show how some aspects of the knowledge obtained from my informants, existing theories, and comparison with other cases might relate to other similar situations and create valuable information about adaptation.

Again, my research questions are:

1) Based on employees' own perceptions and personal experiences, how do Finnish employees adapt to international and local-style company cultures in Korea?
    a) What aspects have helped Finnish employees to adapt to workplaces in Korea?
    b) What aspects have been especially hard for Finnish employees trying to adapt to workplaces in Korea?
    c) To what extent is it possible to adapt as a foreigner, and to what extent are Finnish employees willing to adapt?

From the Table 4 below, we can see that informants' demographics and work experiences in Korea were rather different. Both men and women were almost proportionally represented in my research. Due to informants' varied backgrounds, I was able to obtain information from employees' experiences on both regular and irregular jobs, from international and Korean workplaces, different work positions and during different stages of their careers. Through informants' personal experiences and unique workplace cultures, I aim to examine what aspects might influence Finnish employees' adaptation into Korean workplaces. In the Table 4, the information about the company type, nationality of close colleagues, and primary working language is based on the informants' answers recorded in the Participant Information Sheet. Further, company size was also asked in the Participant Information Sheet. However, due to differences in answer styles and my knowledge on how sizes of the companies and subsidiaries should be measured, I later determined informants' company sizes

based on number of employees in Korea. In the Eurostat (2026) business statistics, enterprise sizes are divided as follows: small 10–49 employees, medium 50–249, and large 250 or more.

Table 4. Informants' demographics and information.

Informant	**Company type**	**Nationality of close colleagues**	**Primary working language**	**Company size (locally in Korea)**	**Work position**	**Years worked in Korea**
A	International	Korean	English	Medium-sized	Upper management	5-10
B	International	International	English	Medium-sized	Specialist	<5
C	International	Korean	Korean	Medium-sized	Upper management	>10
D	International/ Korean	Korean	Korean/ English	Large-sized	Regular employee	<5
Lada	Korean	Korean	Korean/ English	Job specific	Freelancer	<5

Furthermore, to ensure the anonymity of my informants, I used more general descriptions of their work positions. To specify, *upper management* is used as a synonym to top management or executive management, while *regular employee* is used for an office job, and *specialist* is used for someone who is skilled in a specific field.

5.1.1 Willingness to adapt

First, it is important to understand Finnish international employees' reasons and motivation behind the decision to work abroad as it can affect how well they adapt to workplaces in Korea. Before reaching full stability in a new host country, foreign workers often go through a process of adopting local values to become integrated into the new society and social networks. (Hofstede et al., 2010, 387-390.) Han et al. (2021) systematic review shows, that cultural knowledge regarding values, attitudes and behavioral norms can increase integration, while different cultural norms and values can weaken international graduates' workforce integration. Thus, especially at the beginning of employment prior experiences might help expatriates adapt to workplaces, like in the case of informant D [regular employee, 30s].

> D: *"[...] I have knowledge of Korean culture, and for example through my [Korean] partner and also kind of through learning Korean. [...] So, I have gotten very familiar with the working culture.*

Study by Froese (2011) discovered that foreign professors who came to South Korea because of a regional interest were more satisfied and adjusted to work better in comparison to professors who moved to South Korea because of poor overseas labor markets or general interest to travel. These results might suggest that informants who had regional interest also had higher motivation to work in Korea, which further might have increased adaption to the workplace.

Informants' experiences about adaptation and willingness to adapt are somewhat different depending on their work position and personal views. However, all informants find adapting important and are willing to adapt to some extent. Informant A [upper management, 60s] worked in other countries before coming to Korea found Korean work culture more challenging.

> A: *"[...] the places where I've worked before, those have been a lot easier cultures."*

In contrast, some informants even brought up some common points between Finnish and Korean cultures, which can of course make adapting easier. Informant B [specialist, 30s] states as follows:

> B: *"In Finland we have respect on silence [...] Korea is pretty similar [...] There [in Korea] people respect common spaces."*

Having the mindset of wanting to adapt and finding ways to do that, will of course have a positive impact on how one adapts to a workplace. Even though informant A states that there have been easier cultures they have worked at, the informant also says that they went to Korea thinking they will have great time there. Informant D [regular employee, 30s] also states how they think it's important to adapt to workplace where one will spend a lot of time and have some close colleagues one can trust.

> A*: "I won't go there [Korea] for six years to suffer and feel like being in prison for six years and then continue my life after I get out of there. It's horrible how many people think that way."*

> D: *"I think it's really important to [adapt], because I spend almost my whole day and week there at the workplace. So, in that sense, I have always felt that it's important to get along with your team and your close work colleagues. Or at least to have one, two, or three people you can count on."*

Even though inexperienced foreigners can learn organizational rituals and symbols, it is hard for them to deeply understand the underlying values in them, that are often natural to domestic employees (Hofstede et al., 2010, 384). In general, adapting to Korean workplaces is seen challenging due to aspects like hierarchy, communication style, and unofficial relationships outside organizations. Informants were shocked by some information and practices they learned. Informant A [upper management, 60s] discusses how one must accept cultural differences, like persistent gender norms, and find a way to not let them affect one's work.

> A:"*[...] even though it feels weird that for example some woman would become pregnant and terminate their pregnancy because they don't want to stay at home and take care of the family [...] it sounds so horrible. But I started to like [think] that in this country, this works like this, and I have to accept this system. That we just live with these things and go forward and have to hope that slowly life in here [Korea] changes."*

> A:*"[...] we also have a lot of, all sorts of issues, in Finland. [...] But we have learned to live with them and accept them. And I though the same way about Korea that these are the problem areas, but in itself, it doesn't affect my work."*

Like mentioned, we must consider whether an employee has the willingness to work specifically in Korea or whether they were sent to Korea by the home company. For example, some expats might be sent to Korea only for a short period of time to complete a specific task. Informant A explained how expats who came to Korea for only a short period of time, did not often have time or patience to learn a new language or familiarize themselves with the culture. Furthermore, according to the informant, some expats even became annoyed by the Korean culture, food, language, and how things work. This is supported by previous research by Han et al. (2021) on how not having cultural knowledge can weaken integration to workplaces. I would argue that rather than just previous cultural knowledge or regional interest, openness to learn about new cultures and being able to embrace host culture's practices has a great impact on adaptation. Indeed, according to Peltokorpi & Zhang (2022), an employee can see value in host country's work practices and be willing to accept local business practices while also identifying strongly through their home culture. Previous experiences working abroad seems to also increase adaptation. Informant B [specialist, 30s] explains how some cultural practices even stuck with them after leaving Korea.

B: *"My whole career has consisted of international customers [...] international environment is not really new to me. [...] I have seen a lot, and there are always all types of things happening, and so on, but I have learned to take them as business and as things that need to be figured out. So those things do not really shock me anymore."*

B: "I think bowing as a part of a greeting has probably become a permanent thing, and I don't think I even want to get rid of it [...] kind of like a new level of respect [...]."

Informants who worked in upper management positions, seemed to have more autonomy in decision making and defining their leadership style. Informant A [upper management, 60s] explained how they were sent to Korea for their last work assignment, so at that point the informant just worked similarly as before.

A: *"At that age you don't really change anything anymore. [...] I proceeded mostly with the old system."*

When people enter a work organization they bring their values with them, which further contribute to the formation of organizational practices and culture (Hofstede et al., 2010, 346). Moreover, some characteristics that influence one's values are gender, age, educational level, and nationality (Hofstede et al., 2010, 348). Naturally, all informants in this study also brought some Finnish values to the workplaces in Korea. Some informants felt that their personal values should go ahead of adaptation. Informant E, Lada [freelancer, 20s], who is also the youngest informant in this study, explains how in Korea she has become more careful and has learned to hold on to her own boundaries and values, like equality and being respectful towards people. She things it's important to hold on to those priorities.

Lada: *"Here in Korea, I have thought that I'm not going to please anyone if I want to survive here. [...] You cannot please people here, even though it's in their culture, but it also means that you will be wronged. Unfortunately."*

Informant D [regular employee, 30s] discusses about challenges in adaptation and how it has also affected their eagerness to try to adapt going forward. Informant explains that they even considered

switching a workplace but hesitated whether switching a job would make things better. Informant D explains how at the beginning they tried to adapt to the workplace and team through communication, participating in lunches and getting to know people. However, after some time, the informant changed the way they think, as they noticed that their Korean colleagues did not really want to talk about personal things.

> D: *"Especially at the beginning I tried to [...] adapt to the workplace and the team, and so on. [...] Cause of course getting to know people is important also in the workplace. That you know people who you work with. But at some point, I noticed that people do not really open up about their personal things. That was one thing that made it a bit hard to get to know people."*

Based on what the informant D explains, it seems that they have changed the way they think about adaptation from actively trying to adapt to just doing the assigned work and not thinking much about other things like the informant mentions. In research it is mentioned that groups can pressure individual member to change their behavior to match those standards and dominant culture, which represents majority of members' core values (Robbins & Judge, 2017). Thus, in a way, informant D has adapted to the dominant culture, even though it might not correspond with informant's values and communication style. However, I would argue that this type of pressured adaptation, especially if the workplace and community is perceived negatively, can create conflict situations which can further weaken overall adaptation.

Summary

All Finnish informants see it's important to adapt, as one will spend a lot of time in Korea and at the workplaces in Korea. Informants are willing to adapt to some extent, but all of them also put some other priorities, like personal values or company's interests, before adaptation. It also seems that accepting differences as they are and being accommodating can help informants to adjust, even though they would also hold on to home country's practices. Adaptation to a workplace and work community might not always be beneficial to the informant if it creates negative feelings and conflicts within the informants and further weakens the overall adaptation to the workplace.

5.1.2 Korean language skills and adaption

Being able to communicate in the local language can be beneficial when trying to adjust to the host country and workplace. According to Ng et al. (2025), language proficiency and cultural intelligence can predict cultural adaptation, which can also be seen important to some extent in this study. In this study, informants' Korean proficiency differed, some of them being able to work in Korean. Most informants thought that being able to speak Korean could help adapting to Korea and the working culture. Informant A [upper management, 60s] stated that for European employees who work as regular employees, language skills are necessary. Lada [freelancer, 20s] also explained how it is easier for her to get along with foreigners and communicate in English in her job.

> A: *"It must not be easy to get into the community. [...] It requires good language skills.*
>
> Lada: *"[...] with foreigners everyone is equal. [...] It's easier for me to be among other foreigners than fully Koreans. And also, Koreans rarely speak English well.*

Informant D [regular employee, 30s], who has mostly Korean colleagues, sees that informant's ability to speak Korean is taken positively at the workplace.

> D: *"Well they do take it as a positive thing there at the workplace, that I speak Korean, and they also give those types of tasks for me. [...] I do work in English a lot but also in Korean."*

In higher positions and some international companies, informants had a chance for an interpreter, and Korean skills were not expected of them. Further, foreigners were not always expected to know Korean, even though they would know Korean. Regarding work adjustment, English use at the workplace and compatible communication styles were found more relevant than language skills itself (Froese et al., 2012), which I think might also be one reason why informants who were able to use interpreters did not struggle too much with not knowing Korea. With the use of an interpreter there might be other struggles, but perhaps the informants were able to express themselves better when the language skills were not an issue. Further, according to Peltokorpi (2006) Nordic expatriates faced misunderstandings because of different language, communication styles, and difficulty to understand communication that reflects hierarchical differences and contextual cues. Thus, I would argue that Korean interpreter might have also helped with misunderstandings and softening up different communication styles.

A: *"I don't speak Korean. […] I worked with the help of interpreters at work. And then of course some people spoke English and with those people it was fine. But there were a lot of people you had to have conversations with through interpreter."*

B: *"We had two interpreters almost all the time. […] They were always available when I had to work on things. It was not really required for foreigners to know Korean. Maybe you got like 'points for style' when you knew some basic greetings[…]."*

It seems that language skills are not really an issue for upper management or specialists who have interpreters. Informant A [upper management, 60s] who worked in an international company and had mostly Korean colleagues did not learn Korean but still ended up staying in Korea for many years. Lack of language skills did not seem to have a huge impact on informant's work satisfaction. However, learning a language is a time-consuming process, so many expats who only come to Korea for a job posting might struggle with this aspect.

A: *"But I think the problem for us was that 4 to 5 years that the expats are there [in Korea], that is so short, that it is easy to end up not learning the language, like I ended up."*

Informant C [upper management, 60s] explains that when one cannot speak Korean fluently, conversations often last longer as both parties need to confirm that they understood everything. Further, informant C is also hesitant to do business in Korean because someone might take advantage of the situation. Indeed, Hofstede et al. (2010, 387–390) explains how people in the host country often go through different stages before developing a full understanding of foreigners, which further plays an important role in foreigners' adaptation. I think it can be seen from informant C's explanations that sometimes it's not just the language or working skills but also how perceptive host country people are to work with a foreigner.

C: *"Then there are some people who do not want to understand at all, but very rarely […] like in a way that they see a foreigner, and then when there is a difference in pronunciation, they just cannot try to understand. […] But then of course our workers and partners, they have to try to understand, so they learn to understand my way of speaking Korean."*

> C: *"[...] I never made or will make business in Korea [...] because even though you would understand, someone might say that I didn't understand [...] so the Koreans have always made all business deals. [...] Especially if there is some deal, I don't really intervene with those."*

Informant C [upper management, 60s] stated that at times not knowing Korean can also have some unexpected advantages.

> C*: "[...] because if Korean doesn't understand something they can't or won't usually ask, but I can repeat and ask because my Korean language skills are not perfect. And it kind of helps understanding and going through things."*

On the other hand, informant D [regular employee, 30s] explains how being able to speak both English and Korean, in almost a fully Korean workplace, can lead to some extra work. It seems that when English language or more international representation is needed, the work might be pushed to a foreigner, even though it's not related to their work. From foreigners' perspective it can of course be disheartening to feel like one is only taken along because they are a foreigner. Those moments can make a foreign employee feel like they can never fully integrate to the workplace and society.

> D: *"I feel like I have been taken along to all things, also to things that are not related to my role at work at all [...] for example if there are visitors from somewhere abroad [...] they take me along to that because I'm a foreigner, that they [visitors] like when there is a foreigner here that understands about their culture. [...] Those visitors can be from anywhere. [...] Like I'm sometimes a mascot.*

Lada [freelancer, 20s], was the only informant who emphasizes how much easier it would have been to navigate life in Korea if she knew Korean. However, her situation is very different to other informants who had permanent jobs and were able to either communicate using Korean or through interpreters. According to previous research, being able to communicate in the host language positively impacts adjusting to the host country (Froese et al., 2012), and lack of language skills can become a barrier for full integration (Hofstede et al., 2010). The importance of Korean language skills seems to be highlighted in freelance work, perhaps due to continuously having to search for new jobs, communicate with variety of people and navigate through Korean workplaces cultures.

> Lada: "*I do believe that if I would speak better Korean and would have lived in Korea for longer period of time, it would be easier to navigate in these [challenging] situations. But the fact that I don't speak Korean well makes it hard to differentiate peoples' motives."*

Previous research highlights how contrasting communication styles and lack of shared language negatively influence intercultural communication (Peltokorpi, 2006). I think contrasting communication styles are probably very present in Lada's workplaces where she doesn't have a common language with other Korean employees or managers. It is natural for misunderstanding to arise when neither party is able to communicate fluently, and when communication styles are different and reflect hierarchical differences and contextual cues that are hard for Nordic employees to understand, like mentioned by Peltokorpi (2006).

Summary

Based on the interviews, it seems that employees who work in regular positions along Korean people, benefit greatly from knowing Korean. However, in upper management and specialist jobs, there is necessarily no need to communicate in Korean. Depending on whether the organization has more international culture and English speakers or not, employees are able to communicate in English or through an interpreter. On the downside, even though one can speak Korean, it seems that they will always be perceived as a foreigner, which can mean for example some unrelated work tasks or not being able to do business which can affect adaptation to some extent. To conclude, it seems that the language of communication is not as important as being able to navigate through culturally different communication situations.

5.1.3 Social networks and support

Since family and friends are often left behind to one's home country, lack of social connections and close family or friends might make adapting to an unfamiliar country and culture even harder. Informant B [specialist, 30s] and D [regular employee, 30s] both mentioned that Korean nationals had had an important role in their adaptation to the workplace.

> B: *"[...] I had like a colleague I could trust, local [Korean] colleague, that guided me one thing at a time to the work, like starting with the language and dynamics, politeness, [...] eating habits."*

B: *"[Native Korean colleague] explained to us in the project team for example the organizational maps, and like who is working in which position and in what division."*

D: *"I have my own immediate supervisor who is very friendly and has helped me with adaptation a lot and always treats me well and understands that I come from a very different culture. […] Luckily, I have couple of people that I've been able to lean on at work."*

One important social connection for informant D [regular employee, 30s] has been their partner. Previous research also shows that expatriates who had a host country partner had the highest increase in overall adjustment to the host country compared to expatriates who had partners from other nationalities (Davies et al., 2014). The research argues that this might be due to increase in cultural knowledge, which can be transferred to expatriates' relationships at workplace, overall better social networks, and possibility to obtain practical help.

D: *"[…] I have knowledge of Korean culture, and for example through my [Korean] partner and also kind of through learning Korean. […] So, I have gotten very familiar with the working culture. And I have gotten to know those things, all types of things of how Korean working culture can be, through my partner."*

Informant A [upper management, 60s] who worked in an international company explained how there was a possibility to get support from the mother company, local European employees and expat communities.

A: *"In the company X they always kind of train the whole family to the culture, and then we also have people who have lived in Korea and can talk Korean. And we also have, cause this company is rather big, other Europeans there locally, who can explain about the background. […] The EU had kind of a […] in where their European companies and their expats met in different lunch meetings and dinners. We had a contact with each other's, and that was kind of like a support group.*

According to informants, other Finnish people in Korea also helped them to adapt. Even though previous research states that expatriates who adapt the best have a host country partner (Davies et al., 2014), friends or colleagues from one's home country can also help in adaptation. Perhaps these home

country connections bring different type of support and feeling of belonging through Finnish language and same cultural background.

> A: *"And then of course I knew some Finnish people with who we talked from time to time and exchanged ideas, so that support group was pretty important for me. That I had someone to talk to about things."*

> D: "*I have a lot of friends who like to come to Korea and like the Korean culture, so with them I share a lot of things like this. So, I have multiple parties that are clearly interested to hear my thoughts about for example work life in Korea. And then also share about my own experiences and thoughts about things [...] my closest friends are Finnish."*

Lada [freelancer, 20s] does not necessarily have a work-related permanent social network but she has been able to make friends with other foreign actors.

> Lada: *"Usually we spend the whole time together [at shoots] with other actors. [...] Usually you have time to become friends with each other, and everyone knows each other cause same faces often appear in the dramas."*

However, Lada states that since there are only other foreigners around, who are in a similar situation, it is hard to navigate through issues. In contrast, informant D [regular employee, 30s] found it challenging not having peers in their team that do similar work.

> Lada: *"[...] then all other foreign actors we are of course friends, but they are also in the same situation with me. So, they cannot really help me."*

> D: *"Like because I don't have anyone to share things with, like that's why I have to ask my boss. But I have noticed that if there is someone who does a bit different work that I do, like they do have peers that they can ask questions."*

I think Lada and informant D's cases show how depending on a job different type of social networks and support might be needed to help adapt. Labor market dualism and its' negative effects result in issues like non-regular workers having poorer social safety net (Jones & Fukawa, 2016). In an

irregular job, like an acting job, having close colleagues might not always help if the whole group of foreigners faces the same structural issue. I would argue that when issues arise, the importance of close Korean colleagues or a labor union is highlighted in an irregular job. Meanwhile in a regular job, like an office job, social support from a close team and help in task-related issues might be more prevalent. I would think that different acting jobs work as a jump start for many foreigners who want to pursue a career in the Korean entertainment industry or have some extra income to support their lifestyle in Korea. Since there is most likely a very competitive culture around foreigners' acting jobs, Korean entertainment industry is able to use foreign actors without a need to focus on actors' rights. Nevertheless, what connects these cases is that the informants feel that they do not have a right support group or network to help them through issues.

Summary

Colleagues, supervisors, and other social support like a host country partner can help foreign employees to adapt to workplaces in Korea. Especially local Koreans can help foreigners to understand local culture and practices. On the other hand, connections with Finnish friends and colleagues seemed to support and help informants to adapt. While employees who worked in an international company got support from their mother company, it seems that as an irregular employee it is lot harder to find a support group and navigate through conflict situations and structural issues.

5.1.4 Perceived hierarchy

National culture can influence for example preferred organizational structures and job conditions (Robbins & Judge, 2017, 293), which further affects job satisfaction and adaption to workplaces in other countries. Increasing number of Koreans prefer horizontal organization structure along with flexible organizational culture, which further improves employee's long-time employment, satisfaction, and new employees' adaptation (Kang & Yim, 2024). However, as can be seen from informants' experiences, hierarchical structures and communication style challenge Finnish employees' adaptation to organizations in Korea, especially in less international working environments.

Informant B [specialist, 30s] talks about the importance of their Korean colleague in the overall handling of the hierarchical relations as well as the more subtle aspects of hierarchy. However, informant B felt that as a foreigner, they did not have to interfere with the hierarchy at the workplace. Informant mentions couple of practical examples that they noticed at the workplace regarding

hierarchy. First, the informant explained how people tended to act very humble and bow. Secondly, informant noticed how hierarchical ranking and the number of passengers effected the seating order when traveling in a car together. Research by Schein (2017, 107–109) discusses about the role of space and other more subtle physical cues that symbolize organizational norms and work as a status symbol.

> B: *"It [the company] was a pretty hierarchic and like the protocols and division and sections, and who contacts who and on what level and in which matter. […] As a foreigner I didn't really have to interfere with it [hierarchy]. The interfaces of the local company took charge of the level and timing of our responsibilities."*

> B: *"But we had a driver there […] because there was quite a bunch of us, so we didn't have to worry about [seating order], you could sit wherever you want. And overall, it's not an issue in an international environment […]."*

Informant D [regular employee, 30s] emphasizes how as a regular office worker one must be cautions who to contact first. The chain of command in which authority extends from the top to the lowest level of organization and clarifies who reports to who (Robbins & Judge, 2017, 278), can be clearly seen in informant D's workplace. Informant D explains how informant's immediate supervisor had said that the informant should always come to them first. Further, informant D explains that once they asked whether it's okay to contact the head of the unit who could give a permission to a work-related issue, the immediate supervisor did say that it would be okay. However, informant D explained that it feels like it's still not okay to message directly to the head of the unit, but they would rather message for example to the secretary at first.

> D: *"In a way it feels like in the end, all communication will have to circle through someone anyway. I cannot go like straight up [in the hierarchy]."*

Informants A and informant C in the upper management felt that it was easier for them to communicate with other people from their position. Previous research emphasizes how top managers' actions often set the general climate and understanding of what acceptable behavior is (Robbins & Judge, 2012, 306). Further, learning and formation of organizational culture happen through a leader,

that uses personal power to push towards a behavioral change and achieving a specific goal (Schein, 2017, 41–42).

> A: *"I just automatically got, based on my position, an entrance to the organization and managing the company. In that sense, it was a lot simpler."*

Informant C [upper management, 60s] explains how it often depends on the home company whether one is meant to follow the company orders in the host country or whether there is room to focus on other things too. Informant C states that sometimes one must just push forward with the guidelines one got, in which case adapting itself is not necessarily a priority.

> C: *"Of course you have to take the power into your hands if you have come here to be a boss."*

Informant C talks about hierarchy and responsibility of upper management in Korea. Informant C explains how in the upper management position, one must first get familiar with employees and their tasks. Upper management is in charge of giving employees instructions and tasks. Further, informant explains how in Finland, it's common for the person responsible of the work to take responsibility in the case of an accident. However, in Korea, it's more common for the CEO and higher-ups to be responsible in those situations, which can of course challenge upper management's adaptation to workplaces in Korea.

> C: *"The senior management is responsible even though they would not be directly related [to the issue]. […] The responsibility is always on the higher level in Korea."*

Furthermoe, informant A [upper management, 60s] describes how the hierarchical culture promotes following higher-ups' orders without necessarily questioning them, unlike in Finland where it is more common. This correlates with Hofstede's cultural dimensions and Korea being a high power distance society in where employees are unlikely to directly contradict to their bosses (Hofstede et al., 2010, 60). Informant A continues how this type of work environment can create issues, when no one has the courage to intervene when things are going wrong.

> A:*"If the CEO says: 'jump to the water', they will jump."*

Even though the informants in the upper management felt that it was easier for them to communicate with everyone from their position, they also felt that they did not have all the strings in their hands as foreigners. It seems that in the upper management, the issue lies in the deeply rooted hierarchy of the society and the kinship of Korean people. According to research people are more likely to invest in relationships within groups that they feel emotionally connected to (Robbins & Judge, 2017, 211), which might act as an obstacle for a foreigner in charge. Especially because in-group relationships are so important in Korea. Further, Hofstede et al. (2010, 344) states that organization culture is created and preserved by people in the organization, and it's rather difficult to change. This can be also seen in the experiences of the upper management. It is of course not easy for a foreigner CEO to manage an organization with consolidated organizational culture from their non-permanent position.

However, it can be possible for upper management to change the organizational culture to some extent, even though it takes a long time. Informant C [upper management, 60s] felt that they were able to change the work environment in a way that was beneficial for the company, even though it might not have been the Korean way of doing things. For informant C, it was important that people state their opinions despite the hierarchical structure that might have stopped them from speaking up their mind before.

> C: *"I had a diary, or like a black book which, like if someone doesn't oppose anything at all, they get a minus [...] At first [it didn't work] [...] but after working for 20 years, well they started to push back. It was not easy, not everyone succeeded or accepted it, but the 'opposition' did come from them at some level."*

Previous research by Jouhki (2024) on Finnish executives in India concludes that manager who want to lower the hierarchy, should consider that it might be interpreted as a weakness or even incompetency. As mentioned before, more Koreans and especially younger Koreans are more eager to work in companies with more vertical hierarchical structures. However, I think it's beneficial to also consider how strong the organizational hierarchy is, and how employees perceive it, as in some cases trying to flatten the hierarchy might create more challenges for foreigner CEO's than benefits.

According to research, organizational culture can also differ inside one organization for example between low, middle, and top management, or between professional employees and other employees (Hofstede et al., 2010, 373). Informant A [upper management, 60s] wonders how hard it might be for

European employees to work as regular employees. Informant thinks that it will probably take years to become fully accepted into the Korean work community, especially in a middle level management.

> A: *"It must not be easy to get into the community. […] It requires good language skills. […] And requires you to sell yourself to the culture, because I don't think it's easy to get into it [culture]. […] I think a regular worker, let's say in the middle management, who gets into the Korean community, I will take my hat off for you [nostan hattua]. Then you have sold yourself to them very well."*

The age ranking system has been a base for social ties and used to emphasize the hierarchical order between co-workers in Korea (Janelli, 1993, 44–47). In West, we have gotten used to behaving similarly in all situations, which is seen admirable. Meanwhile in East, behaving the same in all situations can be regarded as lack of social roles and knowing how to behave in various situations (Nielsen & Helgesen, 2012, 18–20). It might be hard for Finnish employees to notice every small aspect of hierarchy and how it affects relations as Finnish culture is rather low in hierarchy. Informant C [upper management, 60s] explained how once they made a mistake of putting a younger employee in charge of an older employee, and eventually both ended up resigning. In another case, the same thing happened, but among workers who knew each other from before and had already positioned themselves as junior and senior based on their ages.

> C: *"[…] they happened to have gone to same school, and they knew that the other one is younger. So, they knew each other from before and had positioned themselves [as junior-senior]. […] They had gotten used to that and now because of their work positions, they ended up at opposite positions. So, it didn't work out and one of them left."*

Trust and independency are some important values in Finnish workplaces. Employees are trusted and responsibility is given to them and their work, meaning supervisors will not oversee subordinates' work continuously (FIOH, 2014, 43–51). Further, individualism shows up in Finnish workplaces as employees' autonomy and personal input to work (Ylöstalo, 2007). Regarding trust between the company and its' employees, informant A [upper management, 60s] mentions that in Finland we have gotten used to trusting that people inside the company work for the good of the company. However, according to the informant, trusting blindly can create issues within the company in Korea.

> A: *"[...] the Koreans are so nice you start trusting them. And also, because they do not steal and they are humble and want to work and do work really hard. So, for us it's hard to understand that anything can really happen inside the company."*

Informant A states that compared to an international company operating in Korea, in a Korean company, the hierarchy allows more control within the company. The informant thinks that in Korean companies there won't be similar opportunities for unexpected and private relationships to arise due to the strong hierarchical order. Meanwhile, in international companies operating in Korea, in which informant A also works at, third-party relations are more prone to arise. Informant brings up how those private relationships should be eliminated, but it's challenging. I discuss more about these third-party relationships in the Conflicts-chapter.

Informant C [upper management, 60s] tried to get employees to ask questions and become more independent, but in general, employees are often expected to take orders at Korean workplaces.

> C: *"They give directions from up to down, what you have to do. In practice, the employees wait the manager to tell them what to do. Like you don't think a lot yourself, the tasks are not that independent."*

This correlates to previous research on how subordinates are more dependent on their bosses in high-power distance workplaces and expect to be told what to do, unlike in Finland where independency is values and hierarchy is more about convenience that anything else (Hofstede et al. 2010). In Korea, like in other high power distance cultures, employees accept mechanical structures better (Robbins & Judge, 2017, 293), which can be challenging for Finnish employees who have gotten used to autonomy and independency. According to Jouhki (2024), while Finnish executives might feel that micromanaging their employees is unnecessary, employees in hierarchical cultures feel respected when managers give their time to them and explain things and what is expected on detail.

From regular employees' perspective, not accepting hierarchical structure at the workplace can be perceived as being arrogant or not being a good team player. Interestingly, informant D [regular employee, 30s] tells how in some workplaces in Korea it has become more common to not greet other people, which makes it simpler when one does not need to think about different hierarchical rules like titles or when it's okay to leave work according to hierarchical order.

> D: *"One good thing about my workplace is that I can leave work as long as I have done my work, like I don't have to stay there waiting that my boss leaves first [...] I just close my computer and leave."*

Informant D continues to explain how some people have wondered that maybe the reason why people do not greet at the workplace is that they don't want to make themselves seen in a way that they would have to report when they come and go. Informant D also mentioned that their workplace has more younger people. Perhaps we can see at informant's workplace how Korean organizational culture has changed, and younger employees have more individualistic values these days. According to research, generation Y, people born around 1980–1995, grew up during globalization and prefer horizontal relations (Park & Park, 2018, 279). Further, South Korean employees seem to struggle with the conflict between traditional cultural norms and need for individual autonomy (Kim & Hamilton-Hart, 2022, 126).

Moreover, at informant D's workplace, communication happens mostly on Teams. Informant D explains how in the spoken language the yo-form (요) is used in daily conversations, but when communicating on Teams, more polite form, seumnida-form (습니다), is used also in conversations with people with similar age. Informant explains how this contradicts communication in a Finnish workplace in where communication is usually more casual. But in Korea, informant D questions whether it's even okay to use an emoji in a conversation on Teams in case people would interpret it wrong.

Lada talks about the differences between doing acting jobs in Finland and Korea. She explains how in Finland there has not been same type of ostracizing as in Korea.

> Lada: *"I think in Finland [...] people are way friendlier in a way that in Finland I've never come across the idea that 'we are better than you'."*

This is most likely due to differences between Finland being more individualistic and Finnish people being more open to interact with foreigners in comparison to collectivist Korea in where in-group relations are more important and foreigners are more likely to be seen as outsiders.

Summary

Finnish upper management felt like it was easier for them in a sense that they got their position automatically when entering the company. They tried to flatten the hierarchy and bring some less hierarchical practices to the companies. However, at times they felt that they were not fully in charge because of the hierarchical structures and kinship of Korean people. For example, putting a younger person in charge of an older employee was not taken well. Moreover, in contrast to Finland, upper management felt that they could not trust the employees fully, but uncontrolled third-party relations were prone to arise among Korean people. In an international company regular employee does not necessarily have to think about hierarchy as much. However, it seems that in companies with Korean organizational culture, one must be more careful with hierarchical practices, like who to contact. To conclude, there are issues that lie in the hierarchy and organizational structures that are often hard for foreigners to recognize and navigate through.

5.1.5 Communication

Like mentioned before, in Korea, social roles define how to behave and behaving the same in all situations can be regarded as lack of social roles (Nielsen & Helgesen, 2012, 18–20). Further, communication is an essential part of interpersonal relations and social roles, and different rules define how to communicate in various situations. Informant C [upper management, 60s] explains how differences between where one is from or what schools did on go also affect communication and interactions among employees. Research seems to point that interpersonal relations are not as important for employment as before (Kim et al., 2013). However, I think especially in the descriptions of upper management, personal relations and communication seem to have increased importance. Perhaps this is due to higher average age of employees in comparison to for example informant D's [regular employee, 30s] workplace in where communication and social relations have more flexible rules. Nevertheless, this might also be just a difference in organizational culture, rather than national culture or manifestation of generational difference.

Informant A [upper management, 60s] thought that was easier to communicate with everyone from their position as they do not have to "sell themselves" or always present themselves in a favorable light to everyone. Further, informant A explained that they even ended up changing the layout of the office to change how employees communicate.

> A: *"[...] I think in my job, when you are the CEO, it's a lot easier, because you can talk to everyone. And then because I don't really have to sell myself."*

A: *"[...] In my position it's easier, because the people, [...] it's a good thing for them to be in understanding and relation to upper management so that they get an approval to the operations [...] so that they can advance their own things [...]."*

A: *"You see, I have always had kind of a, like an open approach. We also changed our office the way I like, many people are against it, but I'm pretty much a supporter of having open office because of the communication."*

Informant C [upper management, 60s] had noticed how differences between where one was from, or what school did they go, also affected the communication and interactions. Informant C stated that they spoke similarly to everyone, using the regular formal ending, yo-form (요). The informant also mentioned that they did not speak informally to employees, even though in Korea it is not uncommon for upper management to speak more informally to employees in lower ranking. Moreover, informant B [specialist, 30s] discussed how the atmosphere was more relaxed in their international workplace, and it was okay not to change ones' communication style or manners as a foreigner.

C: *"I do speak the general language to everyone. Like I do not speak informally to anyone [...]."*

B: *"[...] [In Korea] people are often sent to study abroad to US, so that the English language really sticks to their head and they become great at it. [...] So they have experience and understanding from across the sea of some other things too, so you don't really have to try [to adjust to Korean speaking mannerisms etc.]. They have their way of addressing people based on the Korean titles within the business and casual communication. They use those among the Korean stakeholders and colleagues [...] they call Westerners by their first name or last name."*

According to Robbins & Judge (2012, 306), top managers' actions set the general climate and understanding on what acceptable behavior in the organization is. Informant C [upper management, 60s] described how their employees talked about what issues they had and what type of help they needed, both in meetings and in one-on-one situations. In contrast, informant D [regular employee, 30s] also discussed about differences between manager-employee relations and communication

between Finland and Korea. Informant D described how in Finland they felt that it was lot easier to communicate with one's supervisor or manager and ask further instructions. Previous research by Peltokorpi (2007), also showed that collectivism can negatively influence intercultural communication among Nordic expatriates in Japan. In Finland, supervisors have a role to support their employees and employees are expected to tell their supervisor about possible problems (FIOH, 2014, 43–51). Thus, it can be very challenging for Finnish employees to adapt to more one-sided communication style.

> D: *"It is not reciprocal, but rather like accept, read, and study yourself."*

Furthermore, informant D told how it was a culture shock for them that when they came to work, they were simply given materials to go through, learn, and work. At first, the informant thought it would be better to ask for help rather than do things wrong but eventually informant noticed that it's not taken well if one asks questions.

> D: *"In there they hope you work as independently as possible. […] At first, I had some issues with my close supervisor, like how I communicate with them. […] I got a message [from the close supervisor], that just try to do everything as independently as possible […], like I guess I will just do things without even necessarily asking. […] If there is something actually important […] then I will ask about it."*

According to Hofstede et al. (2010, 67), in collectivist cultures like Korea, independency can be seen even contradicting, unlike in more individualistic cultures like Finland where it is often valued. Based on informant D's experiences it seems that top-down communication style and Finnish employees' proactive communication style might create some conflict situations for regular employees at Korean organizational culture. Lada [freelancer, 20s] also describes how communication was very stiff and hierarchical at the entertainment industry. She described how communication with different people in the industry was rather restricted and one couldn't just talk to anyone but there were rules that one needed to follow to keep their job.

> Lada: *"Usually it's the manager, the manager of the agent that you need to ask help. It's the manager that's the only person who you can talk to. […] You don't have any other option."*

> Lada: *"[The K-drama agent] had a contract, it wasn't even a paper that we would have signed, but they send a message saying: 'We have rules like this that if you break one of these rules, you will not be paid the salary'. And then one of the rules was that: 'You will never talk to any director or any one of the staff members. If we notice, you will not be paid the salary.'"*

According to Hofstede et al. (2010), in strong uncertainty avoidance societies, like Korea, uncertainty is seen as a threat, so there is a heightened need for clarity, structure, and rules. Even though Finland could be characterized having higher uncertainty avoidance index than other Nordic countries and I do think that in general Finnish people are rather eager to follow rules, not being able to talk to anyone would be seen unreasonable and too restrictive on individual freedom. However, bending to follow specific social rules, even unreasonable ones, can be seen lack of knowledge on how to behave. (Nielsen & Helgesen, 2012, 18–20.)

Informant D [regular employee, 30s] ponders the challenges within the Korean workplace and interactions. Informant explains how in Finland it is accepted to join a conversation between two colleagues when you know more about a topic. In Finland it's okay to offer help if one knows how some work-related thing goes. The informant has felt that it's even a positive thing that benefits everyone when someone who knows about a specific topic joins the conversation and shares information they have. However, in Korea the informant has noticed that it's not seen as a good thing to join a conversation and share your perspective or suggestions. Thus, informant has tried to ignore conversations they overhear and only say something if asked directly.

> D: *"Here [in Korea] it somehow feels like it's just a bad thing. Or like, that you try to boast with the information. Like, I'm not trying to boast, in my opinion I'm just trying to help. [...] Like maybe in general it's also just a part of Korean culture [...] if you are not part of the conversation, it's not appropriate to join the conversation. [...] Of course it can fully depend on the personality of the person, whether they take it good or not. But I have myself, I have specifically tried to not say anything [...] I just ignore [...] I'm just quiet."*

Informant B [specialist, 30s] explains how replacement of employees in charge of decision making, every 6 months or a year, mixed things up and affected how they were able to build connections and communicate. This can be especially challenging when working with Korean people or international colleagues from collectivist societies, as in those societies there is often a need for stable relationships, and time is needed to build deeper relationships (Robbins & Judge, 2017, 331). Furthermore,

informant B told how at times some employees' chemistries didn't work, in which case there was some freedom to choose who to work with.

> B: *"If you have been able to build some personal relationship, you have to start again with a new person."*

> B: *"[...] for example we had two interpreters. If there were situations in which chemistry between some people didn't work and between others' it did, then we used them interchangeably so that working would be as smooth as possible."*

Finally, informant A [upper management, 60s] talked about the practice of giving gifts to show respect to the relationship one has built.

> A:*"Interpersonal relations are very important, so there [in Korea] they give presents to friends, and so on."*

At Finnish workplaces gifts are usually only given on special days like marriage or retirement (InfoFinland.fi, 2024).

Summary

Upper management felt that it was easier for them to communicate from their position as they were able to shape the communication style, at least to some extent. In an international company, there might be different communication styles among foreigner and Koreans. For example, foreigners might not be expected to use the same titles or communication patterns as Korean people. From regular employees' perspective communication can be very one-sided and there is an emphasis on following hierarchy and social rules in communication. For example, while in Finland it is acceptable and even preferred to join a conversation if one knows more about a topic, in Korea this might be seen arrogant. Moreover, like in collectivist cultures in general, building social connections often takes more time.

5.1.6 Conflict situations

According to previous research, conflicts at organizations can rise from misunderstandings in communication, insufficient information, too little or too much communication, leadership styles,

reward systems or size of the group. For example, larger the group, the greater likelihood of conflict. (Schein, 2017, 260.) Upper management informants talked a lot about the importance of interpersonal relations and how sometimes Korean employees' strong relationships created issues as they outpowered the company's interest. Informant A [upper management, 60s] told how in one case the salesperson from the company and a third party became close friends. After the end of the project, the salesperson wanted some extra income, so the salesperson and the third party tried to benefit from the mutual relationship they had built. Informant A states that in that case, the work was not in the hands of the company anymore. Further, informant A continues on how strong interpersonal relations between Korean employees can create unfortunate and challenging situations as employees do not want to betray a member of a group. Previous research also describes how in collectivist cultures, individuals are loyal to groups they belong to (Hofstede et al., 2010, 92). Moreover, this might relate to previous research on how in collectivist societies personal relationships usually stand more importance than the task itself (Hofstede et al., 2010). Meaning that rather than following company orders and goals, building relationships and maintaining harmony within the group is seen more important. Nevertheless, collective culture can create friction between the upper management and employees when trying to keep company's business transparent. The informant A reflected on the aftermath of another similar case:

> A: *"They don't want to betray a member of the group. They come up with all types of things [...] and talk about all kinds of stuff. And in the end, we didn't have anything else than just facts, calculated facts. We didn't get the real truth out of people in the end. We just had to fire the group without getting any proper explanation from them, because they couldn't betray the friend group. They had to protect each other till the end."*

From this example we can see how it can be hard for the upper management to change organizational culture that has already been consolidated, especially when there are strong cultural aspects that direct employees' behavior. According to research, differences in thoughts and emotional processes can affect company's efficiency and functions in subsidiaries that move abroad (Schein, 2017, 36–37). Further, in large organizations it's also not uncommon for subcultures to develop in response to some problems or experiences a specific group within an organization faces (Robbins & Judge, 2017, 297). Informant A continues to explain how yet again in another situation the company wanted to have competitive bidding for a specific work. However, one employee had already promised the job to a third party during after-work dinner. After the company intervened, the employee took it very personally and hard as they had already promised the job for the third party. Eventually the company

had to forcefully change the third party, which was mentally very challenging and stressful for the employee.

> A: *"Like they do promises among themselves that are binding [...] that are very harmful for the company. [...] And then the community is so strong, and like the Koreans always take care of each other. [...] One Korean does not abandon another Korean very easily, especially for some Western company."*

> A: *"They cannot separate it. They don't see [the separation between] corruption, accepting a friend, and close interpersonal relations. It's a thing to give presents and give something to the other person. It's a demonstration of a friendship."*

These types of conflict situations can be very stressful for both parties. In Finland, transparency and honesty are valued, and Finland actually ranks second on the corruption perceptions index (InfoFinland.fi, 2024), in contrast to Korea ranking 32nd. Thus, understandably from the Finnish perspective these relations outside companies are not okay and should be eliminated. Like Schein (2017) mentions, individualists are more likely to confront differences in opinion directly. Meanwhile, from collectivist perspective, the aim is to preserve relationships, promote the good of the group and resolve differences in opinion with indirect methods (Schein, 2017). We can see how these differences in perspectives on acceptable interpersonal relations and resolving conflicts can create challenging situation for upper management.

To shortly discuss more about informants' explanations on the importance of work group and interpersonal relations which seemed to create most issues for upper management informants. Firstly, informant C [upper management, 60s] describes how they perceived that Korean people see their work friends more important, unlike in Finland where usually other friends are seen more important. Moreover, informant continues to explain how work or afterwork meetings were often held at the expense of family and children. According to Hofstede et al. (2010, 92) these in-group relations bring security to individuals in collectivist cultures.

> C: *"[...] The work group [...] they were eager to spend free time together with the work group, like to go out with the work group in the evening to eat and [...] maybe take a couple beers and discuss, not necessarily about work stuff."*

Moreover, since in collectivist societies, stable relationships are valued and time is taken to build deeper relationships (Robbins & Judge, 2017, 331), informant C describes how it is not uncommon to spend time together and have unofficial meetings outside working hours.

> C: *"That might be one big difference. [...] Here you have dinners or even lunches with suppliers or clients. But in Finland not so much, according to my knowledge."*

Further, informant C mentions how they changed the monthly dinner covered by the company from being once in a month to every second month due to having to save money. This created some resistance among employees who did not like that their benefits were taken away. This perspective can also be found from study by Hofstede et al. (2010, 93) that describes how in collectivist societies employees are more dependent on the organization and more focus is put on what the organization does for its' employees. Thus, it's not surprising that especially at informant C's organization where employees had higher average age, this became a topic of conversation.

> C: *"So people did want to be together with the group."*

Informant C [upper management, 60s] continues to talk about Korean people expectations and how the informant had to navigate through conflicts while also paying attention to regulations and Korean culture.

> C: *"Of course our Korean workers assumed that I will be able to orchestrate between Korean culture and the regulations so that we will get a harmonic solution. That was expected of me."*

> C: *"Some were salary suggestions and some bettering suggestions. I accepted almost all bettering suggestions, because it seemed like it would help them. [...] And some improvements [...] usually I agreed so that there would not be a conflict."*

Some of the informants talked about the competition between the employees on the same positions and competition between new employees who advance within the company at the same time. Informant C explains that especially in situations where employees move at same phase inside the company, there can be even some dirty competition regarding promotions.

C: *"There might be like some jealousy or feeling inferior or so on. And like both might think that they will be promoted based on some criteria."*

These interviews highlighted how Finnish employees in upper management found it difficult to handle the invisible and unofficial relations between Korean people as a foreigner in charge (discussed more in the interpersonal relations-section). However, the conflict situations other informants faced were more like everyday conflict situations that often stemmed from the hierarchical working culture. Informant B [specialist, 30s] explains how the most challenging situation was when employees' dynamics among local employees didn't match, in which case there was even exclusion happening. Informant B says that there were some conflict situations that raised as there were people from different backgrounds and with different levels of humbleness and proudness.

B: *"When we planned whose car to use when going for a lunch, then like [someone] indirectly or very directly expressed to the unwanted person that it might be better for them to walk."*

Informant B also perceived that people from some European countries were more conflict sensitive. However, the informant felt that the dynamics worked well and that Finnish people had considerably less conflicts. Like mentioned before, communication and conflict styles are relevant regarding adjusting to work (Froese et al., 2012), and personal variables like personality, emotions, and values can affect how easily conflict arise (Schein, 2017, 260). Thus, it might be that to some extent Finnish or Nordic employees have more similar communication and conflict styles with Koreans than for example employees from Western European countries.

Based on some informants' descriptions, it seems that the companies do not always follow work-related legislation. Issues around legislation can be hard for foreign employees to even notice let alone bring up, which can further affect their adaptation. Informant D [regular employee, 30s] explained that the working conditions and legislations seem to be mostly fulfilled but the informant has also heard from their Korean partner that some things at the informants' workplace are not according to the work legislation.

D: *"[...] That's pretty common at Korean workplaces, that a work legislation exists but [...] they do not always care [...] every workplace has its' own practices [...]."*

Lada [freelancer, 20s] also describes how the modelling jobs she had in Korea were mostly found by herself and the modelling agency did not do their part as they would usually do. Lada explained that through one job she might have gotten another job, but getting work was done independently and through networking.

> Lada: *"It actually shouldn't be like that, like if you work through a modelling agency the agency is the one employing you."*

Informant D [regular employee, 30s] discusses about the conflicting feelings about what type of employee is respected at their company. Informant explains that someone who does their work well, is early, and does not ask questions is appreciated at their company. The informant feels that one must stay in their role and not question things or make oneself too visible. Further, informant D explains how the communication culture has made them feel like they would rather keep things to themselves and not communicate that much with other people.

> D: *"Of course you will not get along with everyone, that's clear. But then if it's a bit burdensome [...] who you can trust [...] I feel like I hear a lot of things, like talking behind peoples' backs, and so on."*

Informant D explains how they actually asked some Korean colleagues why people don't really talk about things, or why the greeting culture is as non-existent as it is.

> D: *"From their perspective, like maybe they have had someone they know, like conflicts between people that broke out [...] Then due to this situation there is an attitude like this [...] like if there is a new colleague, then they will just be given material like this, like read these and just get to work."*

According to Schein (2017) early group experiences, both successes and failures, in the company can greatly affect the company culture. Further, groups' beliefs, values, and behavior patterns will be taught to newcomers. This is a great example on how some behavior patterns in the organization can be a result of aspects like hierarchical structures but there might have also been some conflict that has resulted in dysfunctional behavioral patterns.

> D: *"At some point I just came into the conclusion that it's better for me to just [...] not to stick out and just do my work and not say anything conflicting. [...] I'm afraid that someone will take things the wrong way. [...] If nothing else, I do try to beat around the bush to express my opinion.*

Informant D explains how as a Finnish person they do say what they think if they disagree with something. However, informant D describes how they have somewhat changed their views and feel like it's better to not say anything. According to Hofstede et al. (2010, 107) meshing one's individualistic opinion into the groups' opinion is very common in collectivist cultures.

Research also shows how relationship conflicts can often be the most exhausting to people because they tend to revolve around personalities (Schein, 2017, 258). It does seem that informant D who works in a Korean-style company, meaning their close supervisors and colleagues are Korean, has had challenges especially related to interpersonal relations and communication. And like the informant themselves described, it can be very burdensome and affect adaptation to the workplace. Informant D continues describing how usually in company dinners one can leave after someone has expressed that they can leave, and rather than company dinners being relaxing time together, they are more like compulsory and formal meetings that extend a workday. As an example, D describes a situation, in which the company had a dinner to celebrate their boss. At some point someone told them that it was okay to leave the dinner and go home, thus the informant also followed what other Koreans did. However, informant explains that the next day the message seemed to be that the boss was angry because they had left the dinner. Informant D continues to describe how the situation unfolded:

> D: *"And then suddenly I got an invite [...] maybe like 15 minutes before [...] that we have a lunch together, that the boss wants that we all go eat [...]."*

In the end, informant D had to cancel a previously arranged lunch date to participate in the company lunch. The informant describes how they thought what the boss might think if they didn't go. Moreover, informant explains how they always try to act in a way that no one would be displeased. Informant thinks that on the surface people perceive things to be okay, but lot of conflicts happen on the inside. I would argue that this is about collectivism and need to perceive harmony.

Lada [freelancer, 20s] has faced some challenging encounters and mistreatment at work as a freelancer. Lada describes the modelling and casting environment to be rather challenging for foreigners. She talks about a time when she was an extra in a shoot along with other foreigners and Koreans. According to her, they got very poor instructions before the shoot and had to stay outside in cold for hours. The overall atmosphere was not good and when she needed help with a small thing, the reaction was cold and ignorant. Rather, the person in charge of them at the shooting expressed that she shouldn't speak like that to them. Further, the foreigners didn't get any food during the shoot, even though there was food available for everyone. She explains that they were just given an excuse along the lines that the other Korean workers didn't want the foreigners to eat their snacks. Lada wonders if it was because the Korean extras came from a different agency than the foreigners, thus they might have had different benefits. The experiences on the entertainment industry, especially as a foreigner, seem to be very challenging. Lada also wonders if it's because foreigners often do not know about the local work legislation and practices and might not necessarily even speak the language at all.

> Lada: *"Most people do not have another option but to stay at work. Because you cannot have another source of income because you have the entertainment visa [...]."*

Lada also wonders that maybe the entertainment industry people didn't want her or anyone else to talk to people because if one has a direct contact to a director, one could get a job directly from them. In that case, the money wouldn't go through the agency, and they wouldn't make a salary. In contrast to some unfortunate situations, Lada explains that when she participated in another shoot, she felt that the atmosphere was much lighter, she could approach to anyone, and she didn't feel like she will be punished if she tries to talk to someone.

> Lada: *"We always had snacks [...]. We got to wait in a heated space, so we didn't have to stand out. [...] Everyone was super nice and friendly.[...] And then it was 100 00 won per hour. [...] It was like an opposite experience."*

Summary

Upper managements' descriptions show how in conflict situations, more emphasis is often put into interpersonal relations and group's interest, which can create challenges for CEO's and transparency of the company. For example, Korean people might make binding promises with third parties that are

harmful to the company. Or in conflict situations, Koreans do not want to betray member of their group, so it can be very challenging to get the truth out of employees. In the case of regular employees at Korean-style workplaces, collectivism and maintaining group cohesion can challenge Finnish employees' adaptation. For example, it can be challenging for Finnish employees if there is a culture of not being able to express conflicting views or talk about issues directly. Moreover, conflict situations might arise especially when a foreigner doesn't know about the local work legislations or practices or speak the language.

5.1.7 Work-life balance

Most informants mentioned how working in an international or European firm might be easier, since the working culture and expectations are often not as harsh as in Korean companies. For example, in international companies the holidays might be longer and it's easier to take sick days. In Nordic countries, people are overall satisfied with their life and work-life interference is especially low in Finland (Drobnic et al., 2010). However, Kim et al. (2018) argues that Korean employees view long working hours rather positively. The informant A [upper management, 60s] explains the contrast between European and Korean workers within a Nordic company and workplace culture. Informant brought up how the company took good care of the employees, so the informant felt secure. Informant A, and other European workers, were able to take a holiday as planned and leave home during workdays in a reasonable hour. However, the informant mentions, that in some cases, the Korean workers were not even eager to have holidays but wanted to work as much as possible. Informant B [specialist, 30s] also talks about Korean people's mindset around working.

> A: *"But the Koreans wanted to stay there [workplace] longer. Koreans don't want to have holidays. -- The labor union movement fought against people not wanting to have holidays. -- They'd rather work as much as possible."*

> B: *"There [in Korea] they have a rather workaholic approach to working."*

I would argue that, at least in companies with older generation Korean people, employees do not find long workdays as stressful as Finnish people would. According to Robbins & Judge (2017, 331), work that interferes with family creates more stress to individuals from individualistic countries, in comparison to individuals from collectivist countries. However, there is most likely a generational

difference. Generation Y, people born around 1980−1995, are known to value work-life balance more than previous generations (Park & Park, 2018).

There were some discussions about timing of the work. It seems that when one works under Finnish work legislation, it is easier to justify to others why one works less. However, when one works in an international company with a headquarters in another continent, there is a need to balance between local and Finnish holidays and overtime hours. Further, at times, time difference can direct the work and working hours. Informant B [specialist, 30s] explains about work-life balance as follows:

> B: *"About the time zone differences and European based team, the days is full of working and in the afternoon follow up meetings with the European stakeholders and easily scrolling through emails till eight at night when things are still rolling in Europe and there might be something relevant for the next day that comes up […]."*

> B: *"The local employees have a bad habit of updating the local management or colleagues through phone even though we are eating together […] then the colleague is stuck on the phone for half an hour, or for an hour on top of the night."*

> B: *"There might have been a phone conference till 8 pm at night, so in a night like that you don't leave work at least before 9 pm before all things have been done […] But if there was nothing scheduled, then I was able to be at peace. Of course, the other European employees were also like more eager to work till late night hours. […] But as I am under Finnish working hours legislation, I do make a clear bookkeeping for myself."*

According to previous research, informant B could be classified as an expatriate with *ethnocentric style*. Meaning that the organizational culture and working style in the host country is more like the one in expatriates home country, so there is hardly any pressure to adjust to different work-life boundaries (Bader et al., 2018).

Of course, the way informants react to stress, different situations and life in general can affect how they adapt to the workplace culture, whether it's in Finland, Korea, or anywhere in the world. For example, research shows that so-called "Type A" personality traits predict stress across all countries (Robbins & Judge, 2017, 331). Indeed, individual differences came up in the interviews especially when we talked about work-life balance. For example, informant C [upper management, 60s] explains

how for them working time has not been an issue, as they do not separate work and free time. For them, everything they do, they simply see as life.

> C: *"I kept my month-long holiday in Finland so that I was reachable the whole time. […] But it didn't bother me. Actually, I preferred to do it rather than not."*

In Finland, maintaining a work-life balance is easier than in many other countries. Sick leave can be taken if employee falls ill and, in that case, they will be paid if they have been employed at least one month (FIOH (2014, 39–40). Regarding being sick, different workplaces obviously have different rules and regulations. Nevertheless, informants in the upper management positions did not seem to have an issue being sick. Informant C states:

> C: *"[…] Because my workstation or place was not limited to one location […] if you were sick or otherwise, you could always check the email and talk [online] […] so it was flexible."*

Informant D [regular employee, 30s] felt overall satisfied with the work-life balance. However, taking time off work when sick seemed to be the most challenging part of Korean work-life balance for informant D.

> D: *"[…] I think like the balance between work and free time has been surprisingly good."*

> D: *"I have been […] at work sick many times. […] In contrast, in Finland, I would […] take a sick leave. […] In here, I will wear a mask and come to work. I will take a painkiller and then will try to get through the day because I don't want to use my yearly holidays. […] It's always like a contemplation with the yearly holidays. […] That's the biggest frustration maybe at this workplace."*

Informant D explains how being sick can mean that one must use their yearly holidays to stay home. Informant feels that the 15 days they earn for yearly holidays, is not enough as it is, so the informant would rather not use them to be sick at home.

> D: *" It's not much[…]. I think it's like half of what we have in Finland. […] But on the other hand, the good thing in Korea is that there are considerably more public holidays. […] But*

> *another bad thing is that in this workplace, and I think in other Korean workplaces too, is that we don't have sick leave culture at all. […] If you have to be off work because you are sick, then you have to use your yearly holiday days."*

Further, when taking sick leave, informant D explains how it is not seen good especially among employees who are doing same time of work. In that situation, especially if there is some competition among people on the same level, people do not like that they have to do someone else's work when they are gone. In collectivist workplaces, the interest of a group is seen to go before one's individual interest (Hofstede et al., 2010, 119). Thus, it is no wonder that it might be seen selfish towards a group as other people must carry someone else's workload.

Park & Park (2018) state that as younger generation Y is becoming part of the labor force, conflicts between them and older generations that value more hierarchical structure are prone to arise. For example, while older generations see company dinners as part of organizational culture, younger generations are more hesitant to participate in them. In Finland, recreational activities are only held occasionally to increase employees job satisfaction and bring a change to days (InfoFinland.fi, 2024). It seems that informant D's company, which has more younger employees, does not organize company dinners too often. Informant states that their team has company lunches or dinners couple of times every six months. Further, there is a possibility to attend different types of activities like sports or book clubs.

> D: *"Managers and like upper personnel, they just drink, eat and drink among themselves and might[…] like impose people to drink alcohol too […] like pour alcohol to people [who don't drink alcohol]."*

Lada [freelancer, 20s] explains about one time in K-drama shoot, where she ended up working an unreasonably long day with a small salary and no overtime payment.

> Lada: *"I thought that they would pay for the overtime hours. […] When I went there, in the end we ended up staying there for 17-19 hours and they only paid the 200 000 won. […] And on top of that we had to drive to the filming location, 3 hours back and forth, which was also unpaid. […]"*

In Finland, the Working Hours Act and collective labor agreement regulate employees' working hours, and overtime work must always be compensated with pay or paid leave (FIOH, 2014, 55-59). However, as mentioned before irregular job often not only have poorer work conditions but the salary is also lower.

Summary

In international companies, and in cases where one's contract is based on home country's work legislation, employees are often able to take a holiday as planned and leave home during workdays in a reasonable hour. One issue that might rise is how to balance between Finnish and local holidays or the time difference when working. What comes to Korean-style company culture, lack of opportunities to take sick leave when needed, shorter yearly holidays, and having to participate in after work activities can affect Finnish employees' adaptation and work-life balance. Furthermore, for irregular employees, lack of transparency and long working hours can hinder possibility to maintain work-life balance.

5.1.8 Equality

Simply put, power distance measures how people with less power within organization accept or expect the power to divided unequally (Hofstede, 2011). Low-power distance can be seen in Nordic countries behavior towards other is not generally dependent on one's age or status. While Finland has power distance index of 33, South Korea has index of 60 (Hofstede et al., 2010, 57–59). Moreover, Nordic countries have organized their welfare systems and labor markets in a way that increases equality through welfare policies, social protection, and low-income inequalities. (Torp & Reiersen, 2020.)

On the other hand, some subsidiaries can have such strong corporate culture that they function similarly to the headquarters in other countries too Schein (2017, 36–37).

> A: *"But of course as a European company, we do of course have way less of this [inequal practices] as we bring the European culture in there [Korea]. So, we of course work differently.*

Regarding equality, some informants talked about how at workplaces where majority of workers are men, or at higher work positions, woman might face challenges and discrimination based on their sex. This can be very challenging for both Finnish upper management to handle as well as Finnish

women in more male-dominated workplaces. Informant A [upper management, 60s] explains how Korean work culture is "men's culture" in many ways.

> A: *"It's hard to come work to the upper management at the Korean company because it's very manly. You have long nights, and after a long workday you go sit night out somewhere, eat, drink, and get drunk, and then you go home drunk around 12."*

Informant C [upper management, 60s] describes how age also affects what tasks one has.

> C: *"Also among the women, the order of age is important in Korean places [companies]. Like the younger indeed does always do the dirtiest or most uncomfortable things."*

In Finland, employer must arrange flexible working hours if the employee wants to take a partial childcare leave to take care of their small child (FIOH, 2014, 55–59). Further, paid leaves help mothers to spend time with their small children while keeping their paid employment (OECD, 2018). However, it seems that in some companies in Korea, women still feel like they have to choose between work and family, and they are afraid to lose their jobs when becoming pregnant. Informant A [upper management, 60s] explains how there was one colleague in their work group who got pregnant and was afraid that she would be fired. The situation was confusing for the informant A too, who was very surprised about how anxious the colleague was and how she was thinking whether she should terminate the pregnancy or not.

> A: *"It came out of nowhere. I didn't understand at all what was the problem. [...] She of course thought that she will be fired now that the baby is coming. And maybe many Korean companies even might. Well, the situation continued so that we just told that no matter what, I didn't know what else to tell, that your employment contract will continue at this company."*

The informant A continues explaining what might have been the reason behind the situation. Informant explains that in the case of keeping the baby, the woman would have had to stay at home and take care of the whole family, including grandparents, as well as the whole household. Indeed, research shows that traditional gender roles remain a big reason for women not being able to work full-time, and work and family life are not easy to combine (Fluchtmann & Patrini, 2023). Recent study by Um (2023) also suggests that especially young women are ready to quit their jobs because

of hierarchy and gender inequality at workplaces. This requires cultural understanding and sensitivity from upper management handling these types of issues that we often find unthinkable in Finland. Informant A continues:

> A*: "That change is very hard for these young women. Because these men insist on that old culture, especially a bit older ones. But even the younger ones have been through it, that this is our culture that women go home and take care of the family. That is the social security office."*

Informant C [upper management, 60s] also talks about past times, years ago when they first started working in Korea.

> C: *"It used to be that after the kids are born the wife will stay at home [...]."*

> C: *"[...] It used to be that the woman employees were the ones serving the guests. [...] But that has also changed. [...] But of course that also depends on your position."*

Further, informant A [upper management, 60s] describes how they noticed Korean men not wanting to go home after work but work late and go out drinking after work. According to informant, the men did not want to get involved with everything happening in the house. There are also studies that show that while in individualistic West, family resources can reduce a negative relationship between job stress and job satisfaction, in collectivistic countries there is an opposite effect of family working as an additional stressor rather than enricher for work life (Lee et al., 2011). This mindset that reflects to workplaces and overall equality can be challenging for Finnish families and employees stationed in Korea. This of course also affects men employees' adaptation also if they feel pressured to work late and neglect their families. However, informant A also mentions how Korea is slowly breaking out of this male-dominated culture. Further, informant C [upper management, 60s] also emphasizes how these days it has become more important for younger men and women to put more importance to one's family instead of only focusing on work.

> C: *"It of course depends on a workplace, like not necessarily in the big companies [...] or here in Seoul anymore, but if you are in those provinces, and in some smaller companies [...]*

women are not very often in important positions. But I do think that behavior has changed a lot."

In Finland, it's not uncommon to have women and younger people in supervisorial positions (FIOH, 2014, 43–51). However, based on informant B's explanation, it seems like especially in upper management positions, women might face some jealousy and push back from men. Informant B [specialist, 30s] also had an experience in where one of their colleagues in a higher position did not get fully accepted because she was a woman. According to research, in general, older bosses are more respected in high-power distance organizations (Hofstede et al., 2010, 73). Informant B explains about the situation as follows:

B: *"[...] She had worked a lot to get into the position [...] people started to believe in her, and that she could also work in tough situations, and drink with men in professional settings. [...] But after she had gotten into the position [...] not all client organizations realized how good she was and that everything works out through her. [...] Then at some point there was an older Korean male in our group, that took it hard that she was younger and a woman who can make things work, and that he was seen as an underdog next to her. [...] There were some issues there at times."*

Nevertheless, according to descriptions by informant D [regular employee, 30s], we can see how things are slowly changing at some companies in Korea. However, I wonder if this is because at informant D's workplace there seems to be more women on average working as regular employees and in higher positions. According to one study, women are more likely to be chosen to firms that offer flexible working arrangements with often also lower salaries (Hijzen, 2023).

D: *"[...] I have been surprised how many women we have, in like in big roles. My supervisor is a woman, my sectional chief is a woman, we have a lot of women working. [...] In that sense I can say [equality] is achieved."*

Informant D explains how in their workplace, they have rather good parental leave opportunities. Or if one is pregnant, they can do a shorter work week or workday.

D: *"[...] I do feel like these types of things are like rather good at my workplace."*

The informant D wonders, if one reason for this is because they have rather many women working at the company which might be one reason that the company wants to offer good benefits to be able to attract young women to work. The informant also wonders if it's because the company wants to attract young women who are more likely to be obedient and better at taking orders. However, informants D did not perceive there to be any gender inequality at their workplace. Furthermore, Lada seems to feel the same.

> D: *"At least not on my workplace or close team. I have not noticed, we all share responsibility pretty evenly. It's not like it might be in many other professions in Korea in where they throw you out after you return from the maternity leave. I do know people, from my close friend group, who have been in some specific role as a woman and then they've become pregnant and given birth to a child. Well, they haven't gotten back to the same job. [...] But my workplace luckily hasn't had anything like this.*

> Lada: *"I have not noticed that [inequality] at any point. At least [...] at the entertainment industry all sexes have been equal. [...] I have seen men and women as directors. [...] I think there are both men and women at the entertainment industry. But I feel like sometimes camera staff, they are more likely men cause they have to carry heavy equipment and stuff."*

Regarding equality from the perspective of being a foreigner in a Korean workplace, informant D is aware that there are things that people overlook because they are a foreigner and they have a different background and culture. Informant D mentions that sometimes their colleagues don't say anything to the informant because they probably just feel like the way informant works is just because they are a foreigner. However, informant mentions that they would appreciate if at times someone would take notice on things and recommend alternative ways of working to them, which would also help the informant to work better. Informant D continues to say that they have accepted the fact that they will always be a foreigner, and will simply make most of it, as they will never be accepted as one of Koreans. Hofstede (2010) argues that as humans, we have a need to classify people either to belong to "we", an in-group or "they", an out-group, and that one's identity stems from being part of a specific group. Moreover, collectivist cultures stress belonging, thus individuals should be loyal to groups they belong to (Hofstede et al., 2011). Therefore, foreign employees can feel like they will never fully belong to Korean people's in-group, as it's harder for employees to integrate to collective societies and workplaces than individual ones.

Summary

Employees in organizations that have higher average age might face more challenges regarding equality. Informants in the upper management feel that the company culture is still very “manly” and women can be in disadvantages positions even though the company culture has changed a lot already. This can result in conflict situations that upper management has to navigate through. Depending on which industry one works, it is also possible that there are more women working, also in high positions, and those companies seem to also be more likely to offer benefits for women for example during and after pregnancy.

5.1.9 Future prospectives and salary

Regarding conversations around salary, I wanted to keep conversations confidential, thus I won’t be discussing any details. However, I did want to hear what informants had to say about the topic. Informant D [regular employee, 30s] explains how it’s not really possible to advance at their workplace, no matter how hard or well one works. Informant D mentions that it might be possible to change tasks within the company. However, the informant feels like going forward it is likely to be challenging to advance in their career, especially compared to what could be possible in Finland. Moreover, getting a promotion takes time.

> D: *”I have to maybe at least for the next 5-6 years, work there, like advancing in your career is very hard.”*

Informant C [upper management, 60s] states that if you are highly skilled or work in a field where your expertise is needed, your salary is likely to be higher. Thus, Finnish workers who have a specific skillset and expertise will be most likely content with their salary. When it comes to the informant’s own salary, informant C states that they had higher salary than a Korean worker in a corresponding position. This correlates to a study by Kim & Lee (2023), that states that immigrants from non-Asian countries and Japan tend to first earn even more than native Koreans.

Informant D [regular employee, 30s] and Lada’s experiences show how foreign workers in Korea, that are under Korean employment terms, might not often have room to discuss about their salaries and their request might be seen rude or unheard of. Informant D did try to discuss about their salary after their job position changed. However, the response to informant D’s request seemed very disparaging and the discussion about the salary did not go any further. Nevertheless, the informant states that the salary is rather good, also compared to Korean people’s salary.

> D: *"Salary is kind of a tabu. I think I have even been said not to talk about salary with other people. I think I've been told that one's salary has to be kept for oneself. I cannot say whether there are any differences at the salary rates."*

Lada [freelancer, 20s] talks about how it's impossible, as a non-Korean, to know if the salary she gets is appropriate. She states that for example in the previously mentioned acting job, the foreign actors and Korean actors had different agencies, thus she wondered if the Korean actors ended up receiving better compensation.

> Lada: *"I heard from another actor that they [agencies] usually take 50 % of it [the salary]. So, let's say they pay me 600 000 won and take the same 600 000 won. So, the total amount they have paid for me is 1 200 000 won. And then in the case of these K-dramas, it might be that they have paid 1 000 000 won from me, but they [agency] have only give 200 000 won for me for all the hours and taken the 800 000 won."*

Moreover, for Finnish employees who have ambition and would like to take more responsibility of their work and advance in their careers, it can be especially challenging if there is no space for autonomy and self-governance. Informant D [regular employee, 30s] explains that the nature of the work is rather repetitive, and there is no opportunity to generate ideas.

> D: *"[...] maybe in that sense I feel bummed that, cause I do have ambition, like I would like to advance in my career to some extend [...]."*

In Finnish workplaces, the law is always on employees' side, and labor union can always be contacted, for example if there are issues regarding salary or working hours, in which case the issue will be solved, and employer will have to comply with the agreement (Työelämänpelisäännöt.fi, 2025). Lada [freelancer, 20s] got an acting job for K-drama through a job posting online, which is common at the industry. She describes how the amount of salary was not stated clearly, and she ended up working an unreasonably long day with a small salary and no overtime payment.

> Lada: *"That is another negative thing that I don't like here in Korea. The salary is just unbelievably low for all the time and work you do."*

She talks about how agencies often take money from the small amount of salary she gets.

> Lada: *"Every time I've gotten my salary, it has gone through my own model agency that has taken extra 30 % [of the salary]."*

Lada also talks about how recently the legislation was changed so that actors should be paid minimum of 120 000 won for 6 hours. However, according to her, the model agencies go around this rule by offering a base salary of 120 000 won, meaning 20 000 won per hour, but no overtime salary. Or if they do happen to offer an extra salary for overtime work, it might be half of the hourly salary. Lada's perception is that it is common for different parties to try to somehow deceive or strip money off the employee in all possible situations, so one must be very careful with contracts they make. She thinks that the situation is not like in Finland.

Summary

Salary and future prospectives in a company are very different depending on whether one works as a regular or irregular employee. Upper management and specialists who have a specific skillset, or work under Finnish labor laws, might have higher salary to begin with. However, it also seemed that as a regular employee or office worker under Korean labor laws, the salary is also seen sufficient. However, talking about one's salary is still seen as a taboo. Moreover, aspect like repetitive work and lack of opportunities to advance in one's career compared to Finland, can affect long-term adaptation. Freelancers or irregular employees are probably most likely to suffer from low salary and irregular working hours.

5.1.10 Advice for future Finnish employees in Korea

Finally, informants in this study also discussed about things that future Finnish employees in Korea should consider. Informant A [upper management, 60s] describes how it would be important for CEOs to stay in Korea for longer time and familiarize themselves with Korean culture as fast as possible. That would able them to assume their position and work in a way that Koreans also expect them to work. Informant C [upper management, 60s] states that the most important advice would be to show respect in every situation.

> C: *"[...] it is essential that you respect people here. No matter the position or situation. [...] Even though you would not agree or accept everything here."*

Informant C also states that even though one would bring their own culture and practices with them, those things cannot be insisted of other people, so one should be ready to adapt.

> C: *"[...] be ready to adapt. But I think with positive attitude, and so on, I think there are no issues here. Korean people are very friendly. Of course, the work environment can change the situation. If a competitive situation arises."*

Regarding obtaining a job in Korea, informant C brigs up that a foreign worker might be seen as a burden for work colleagues and leadership.

> C: *"It is a different thing if you have a language skill that they don't have here. Then you might be in a very good position. But if you [...] come work here as a regular worker, something that Korean people can also do. Then you might not be respected the same way."*

In contrast to this, informant D [regular employee, 30s] would encourage people to think of other countries to work at, as adapting to a Korean workplace can be very challenging.

> D: *"I have only come [to Korea] because my partner is Korean [...] I do like Korea and Korean people, and I like Korean culture a lot. And I can live here and be in my current workplace, but I would say that it is very hard to adapt here."*

Informant D states that especially for Finnish people who are often used to more relaxed, hierarchy-free working environment, long yearly holidays, and possibility for sick leave, the Korean working environment can be hard to adapt to. Further, informant D explains that in Finland it is easier to work remotely or do shorten workday if necessary. For people who want to work in Korea, informant D would recommend working in a company that has other foreigners too. Informant ponders how having other foreigners at the same position or situations would likely make life easier.

> D: *"From the perspective of work culture I would say [people] to not come here. Please come here to study and study a degree, that's valuable experience. [...] If there is a situation in which you really want to live in Korea with your partner, or just because you want to enjoy Korean*

lifestyle and culture. […] If you want to do that, please go work in a company that has as many foreigners as possible. That helps."

Finally, for foreigner who work irregular jobs in Korea, advancing in a career and living in Korea not knowing when one will find the next job can be very challenging. Lada explains how work at the entertainment industry is very irregular, and it might be that you don't get work for every week because the work depends on what dramas are being filmed or what projects are going on. However, as a positive mark, she thinks that it's nice to choose if you want to work on specific projects or not.

5.2 Discussion

The aim of this study was to research how Finnish employees adapt to workplaces in Korea, and whether there are some cultural aspects between Finnish and Korean cultures that affect Finnish employees' adaptation. Currently, there is only one previous thesis on Finnish employees' adaptation to Korean workplace culture, and only a handful of studies researching the cultural differences between Nordic or Western expatriates in East Asian workplaces. To answer my research questions, I used qualitative methods to collect and analyze my data. Interviews were conducted on five Finnish informants who had experience working in Korea to understand Finnish employees' individual situations and subjective experiences about adaptation more deeply. Further, I used a thematic analysis to identify and analyze specific patterns and themes within the obtained interview data. Even though these result can not be generalized, the practicality of these results can help us understand what type of situations Finnish employees face at workplaces in Korea, and what challenges future employees in similar positions might face when working in Korea.

Based on this research, there are various things that might help Finnish employees to adapt to all types of workplaces and positions in Korea. First, being willing to accept cultural differences and having flexibility to change one's behavior to some extent can increase adaptation. I think all my informant could be classified as integrated bicultural expatriates, that according to Peltokorpi & Zhang (2022), are open to learn about new cultures and find value in host country's work practices, which helps them to adapt to local business practices. Further, according to another study (Bader et al., 2018) informants could also be classified as having ethnocentric style and localized style, which guarantees highest work-life balance satisfaction. Thus, through accepting cultural differences, adopting some local practices, and being flexible, employees might have a higher chance to adapt to workplaces and work culture in Korea. This does not necessarily mean that there is a need to fully

immerse into Korean culture, but it is also possible to hold on to some home country values and practices. These classifications can be useful when evaluating Finnish employees' adaptation to companies and international organizations' subsidiaries in Korea. Furthermore, close social connections, especially with host country nationals, can make adaptation easier.

There are also some challenges Finnish employees are most likely to face when working in Korea. First, even though one would speak Korean fluently, one will most likely always be perceived as a foreigner, which can affect adaptation negatively. Foreigners can learn organizational rituals and symbols, but it will most likely be hard for them to fully understand the underlying values in them (Hofstede et al., 2010). According to Peltokorpi (2006) Nordic expatriates do indeed face misunderstandings because of difficulty to understand communication that reflects hierarchical differences and contextual cues. Issues Finnish employees face in Korea probably largely relate to hierarchical organizational structures. Especially, employees in organizations that have higher average age might face more challenges regarding equality as hierarchical practices are more acceptable among older generations. Finland among Nordic countries and Germany can be characterized as a low power distance society (33) in contrast to Korea (60). These results show that the characteristics of high power distance society can influence Finnish employees' adaptation to Korean workplaces in different ways. For example, like Hofstede et al. (2010) also mentions, it can be challenging for employees to not be able to speak up their mind as it can be seen as contradict one's boss. Further, in Korea, like in other high power distance cultures, employees accept mechanistic structures better (Robbins & Judge, 2017, 293), which can be challenging for Finnish employees who have gotten used to autonomy and independency. Moreover, talking about independence, Finnish employees will most likely also face challenges regarding possibility to think and work independently. While Finland scored 63 in the Individuality Index scale, Korea scored 18, showing how in Korea collectivism, belonging to a group, and meshing one's opinion into group's opinion is common. Even though we should acknowledge that especially younger Korean workers tend to have more individualistic values and be more hesitant to commit to the company's traditional values (Kim & Hamilton-Hart, 2022). In this study, I did not want to focus too much on Hofstede's dimension on uncertainty avoidance. However, I find it rather interesting that Finland's Uncertainty Avoidance Index of 59 is closer to Germany (65) and even slightly closer to Korea (85), than Sweden (29). Thus, even though Finland might be classified as a Nordic country, Finland might have more similar cultural characteristics with Germany in some respects. Moreover, we can see that Finland and Korea probably also have some similarities when it comes to work culture and preferences. For example, in uncertainty avoiding cultures, like Korea, there is a need for clarity, structure, and rules

that help employers and employees to work well (Hofstede et al., 2010), that I think can also be seen in many Finnish workplaces and preferences Finnish people have.

Moreover, as we know from previous research that contrasting communication styles greatly influence intercultural communication (Peltokorpi, 2006) and that compatible communication and conflict styles are very relevant regarding adjusting to work (Froese et al., 2012), we should acknowledge the importance of power distance and its' effect on communication and conflicts. For example, while in Finland we have gotten used to being more straight forward, being more indirect is often the way to solve issues in Korean workplaces. Nevertheless, while discussing about how national cultures can affect organizational cultures, we must remember that some characteristics within organizations can be just the result of that specific organizational culture and experiences within the organization rather than result of national culture. Further, personal variables like personality, emotions, and values can affect how easily conflict arise (Schein, 2017, 260), and how well one adapts. Finally, according to Hofstede et al. (2010), people in the host country often go through different stages before developing a full understanding of foreigners. Thus, these results also shows that it is not only Finnish employees that will have to adapt but also Korean employees will have to show some type of cultural understanding and reciprocate to help everyone's adaptation.

There are also some aspects that somewhat contradict the previous research. For example, research seems to point that interpersonal relations are not as important for employment as before (Kim et al., 2013). Perhaps this can be true in some Korean-style workplace, like informant D's workplace where communication happened mostly online and there was no need to let anyone know when coming to work or leaving. It seemed that most employees at informant D's workplace did not feel the need to build strong interpersonal relations. This might also be due to organizational culture and employees' experiences rather than national culture. However, I think especially in the descriptions of upper management, personal relations and communication seem to have increased importance. Upper management employees worked at companies with higher average age, which might be one reason for employees having stronger values regarding interpersonal relations. Further, studies show how language proficiency and cultural intelligence can predict cultural adaptation (Ng et al., 2025). However, I think this research also shows how rather than language proficiency, being able to communicate at the workplace, even if it's in English or through an interpreter, can help adaptation. Finally, previous research also shows that expatriates who had a host country partner had the highest increase in overall adjustment to the host country compared to expatriates who had partners from other nationalities (Davies et al., 2014). However, I would argue that one's personality and being willing to learn about another culture adds to this adjustment. Further, this research seems to show

that other Korean nationals, like Korean colleagues, also play equally important part in Finnish employees' adaptation to workplaces.

While analyzing the research data, I noticed that some Finnish employees naturally had more similar company culture and experiences due to their position and company type. Thus, next I go through the most important research results discussing about Finnish informants' experiences as upper management, and as employees in international and a Korean-style workplace.

Upper management

The upper management has some benefits when it comes to overseeing their own work and communicating with people from their higher position. In upper management position, there is often more autonomy to change things within the company as Finnish upper management is often sent to Korea to fulfil a specific task and oversee that the company's interest is being fulfilled. Thus, there might not be similar need to adapt to everything like regular employee might have. However, upper management also has to navigate through challenging conflicts as foreigners who might not be fully accepted to the company. Further, in upper management, especially if one has been sent to Korea by a home company or the company is international, there is necessarily no need to communicate in Korean but either in English or through interpreter which can help adjustment. Upper management who has been send to Korea can also get support from their mother company which can ease adaptation to Korea. Upper management also used their power to try to flatten the hierarchy and bring some less hierarchical practices to the companies. However, at times they felt that they were not fully in charge because of the hierarchical structures and kinship of Korean people. For example, putting a younger person in charge of an older employee was not taken well. Moreover, in contrast to Finland, upper management felt that they could not fully trust the employees, but uncontrolled third-party relations were prone to arise among Korean people. Upper managements' descriptions show how in conflict situations, there is more emphasis on collectivism and group's interest which creates challenges for CEO's and transparency of the company. In Finland, people value transparency and honesty, and Finland actually ranks second on the corruption perceptions index (InfoFinland.fi, 2024), in contrast to Korea ranking 32nd. Thus, understandably from the Finnish perspective these relations outside companies are not okay and should be eliminated. For example, Korean people might make promises with third parties that are harmful to the company. Or in conflict situations, Koreans do not want to betray a member of their group, so it's impossible to get the truth out of employees. This relates to previous research on how in collectivist societies individuals are loyal to groups they belong to, and personal relationships usually stand more importance than the task itself

(Hofstede et al., 2010). Further, from collectivist perspective, the aim is to preserve relationships, promote the good of the group and resolve differences in opinion with indirect methods (Schein, 2017), which can be especially challenging for upper management trying to solve issues directly. Informants in the upper management feel that the company culture is still very "manly", and that women can still be in disadvantages positions, even though the company culture has changed a lot already. Indeed, research shows that traditional gender roles remain a big reason for women not being able to work full-time, and work and family life are not easy to combine (Fluchtmann & Patrini, 2023). Inequality can result in some conflict situations that the upper management has to navigate through and be prepared for. At upper management, in cases where one's contract is based on home country legislation, employees are often able to take a holiday as planned and leave home during workdays in a reasonable hour. Finally, upper management and specialists who have a specific skillset might have higher salaries in comparison to Korean employees in same positions. This correlates to a study by Kim & Lee (2023), that states that immigrants from non-Asian countries and Japan tend to first earn even more than native Koreans. One advice from the upper management to future employees in same position is to stay in Korea for longer period of time and familiarize themselves with Korean culture as fast as possible which can able them to assume their position and work in a way that Koreans also expect them to work.

International company

In general, it seems that in an international company there are some aspects that make it easier to adapt in comparison to Korean-style companies. This is of course understandable as research also mentions that subsidiaries that have strong corporate culture often function similarly to the headquarters in other countries too (Schein, 2017, 36–37). Thus, if the home company's culture is strong also in the host country, it is easier for the informants to adapt to the work culture. These results also show that in an international company regular employee does not necessarily have to think about hierarchy as much. If there are more foreigners in a company, the company can have separate cultures for Koreans and foreigners. For example, while Koreans call each other by titles, foreigners might not be expected to do this. Or while a seating order might be followed among Korean people, foreigners are not expected to know different hierarchical practices. In specialist jobs, especially if one has been sent to Korea by a home company or the company is international, there is necessarily no need to communicate in Korean but either in English or through interpreter which can help adjustment. Employees who work in an international company can get support from their mother company or in some cases people are trained to the home company's culture, which can make

adapting to Korea easier. In international companies, and in cases where one's contract is based on home country legislation, employees are often able to take a holiday as planned and leave home during workdays in a reasonable hour. One issue that might rise is how to balance between Finnish and local holidays or the time difference when working.

Korean-style workplace

From regular workers perspective communication can be very one-sided and there is an emphasis on following social rules in communication, which can be one important downside for Finnish employees who have gotten used to more reciprocal and free communication style with their colleagues and bosses. For example, while in Finland it is acceptable and even preferred that one joins a conversation if they know more about a topic, in Korea this might be seen arrogant. It seems that employees on regular positions need to know Korean. In Korean companies, for example in an office work, one must be more careful with hierarchy, for example who to contact. Peltokorpi (2007), also showed that collectivism can negatively influence intercultural communication among Nordic expatriates in Japan. From collectivist perspective, the aim is to preserve relationships, promote the good of the group and resolve differences in opinion with indirect methods (Schein, 2017). However, in the case of regular employees, collectivism and maintaining group cohesion can challenge Finnish employees' adaptation for example if there is a culture of not communicating directly. Furthermore, it seems that irregular jobs, like entertainment jobs, might perpetuate very hierarchical structures which can really challenge adapting. Moreover, conflict situations might arise since foreigners often do not know about the local work legislations, speak the language or know local practices. What comes to local style company culture, lack of opportunities to take sick leave when needed and having to participate in after work activities might challenge adapting. As a regular employee and a foreigner, it might be harder to be a respected and needed employee if a Korean person can also do the job and has the language fluency. It seems that as a regular employee, the work can be rather repetitive, and it is not as easy to advance in one's career compared to Finland. According to Hofstede et al. (2010, 67), in collectivist cultures like Korea, independency can be seen even contradicting, unlike in more individualistic cultures like Finland where it is often valued. Moreover, as freelancer or irregular employee, low salary and lack of transparency can weaken adaptation. Labor market dualism and its' negative effects result in issues like non-regular workers having poorer social safety net (Jones & Fukawa, 2016). Depending on which industry one works, it is also possible that there are more women working also in high positions, and those companies seem to also be more likely to offer benefits for women for example during and after pregnancy.

This research demonstrates how Hofstede's cultural dimensions, especially dimensions on power distance and individuality versus collectivism, that have been researched more, can offer valuable perspectives to future qualitative research on cultural differences. However, cultural dimensions can not solely be used to analyze cultural differences between nations or organizations as there are many more things that affect how one adapts to a culture. We must recognize organizational and individual differences in practices and values when researching cultural differences. Organizational culture can reflect values of the national culture, but the history of organization, organization type, and generational differences are also some aspects that need to be considered when talking about "Finnish culture" or "Korean culture". Even though cultures can not be easily defined and they keep changing, we can still draw general lines and overview of a culture to help us work more efficiently in foreign nations and with other nations.

The purpose of this study was to examine individual experiences and challenges Finnish people face while trying to adapt to workplaces in Korean. While movement of labor increases and companies move their factories abroad, understanding possible cultural differences and training employees to work in culturally different working environments is needed to build successful co-operations. National culture can influence many aspects like preferred organizational structures and job conditions, which will further affect employees' satisfaction and adaptation into workplaces. This information can be used to help future employees from Finland or other Nordic countries to gain some knowledge and perspectives about Korean workplace culture before their placement. For future note, it can be beneficial to consider the scope of the project, as it would be beneficial to choose fewer themes to research in order to obtain more detailed and throughout information. Further, I would suggest dividing employees into separate categories based on their job position and company type to obtain more reliable data on their experiences. These findings can not be generalized to cover whole Finnish or Nordic population and their adaption to Korean workplace culture, but they can work as an example on what are some issues Nordic people might face when working in Korea.

To conclude, many different factors like the position of the employee, the company structure, average age of company employees, personal characteristics, and sex influence how Finnish employees adapt and whether they see necessary to adapt to the workplace culture. However, we can summarize results from this study as follows. Regarding the upper management, the biggest issue might be Korean employees' kinship and third-party relations that might be hard to manage as a foreigner. However, for upper management it can also be easier to come into the company as they obtain their position and some power automatically. What comes to employees in European international companies or subsidiaries in Korea, it can be easier for those employees to adapt as the company practices are often

more similar to the home company's culture and practices. Further, international companies, that have greater number of foreign employees or work with foreign parties more frequently, are more likely to have sort of mixed organizational culture that does not pressure foreign employees to obtain as many host country's cultural practices. Finally, Finnish employees in irregular jobs and Korean-style companies without foreigner, might face most everyday challenges related to hierarchy, communication, and work-life balance. Especially lack of yearly holidays, and rules and lack of autonomy regarding work tasks and communications, can be challenging for Finnish employees who have gotten used to more individualistic and laid-back working style.

6 Conclusion

The aim of this research was to obtain information from Finnish employees working in South Korea and to understand possible cultural aspects that can affect Finnish employees' adaptation to organizational practices at workplaces in South Korea.

My research questions were:

1) Based on employees' own perceptions and personal experiences, how do Finnish employees adapt to international and local-style company cultures in Korea?
    a) What aspects have helped Finnish employees to adapt to workplaces in Korea?
    b) What aspects have been especially hard for Finnish employees trying to adapt to workplaces in Korea?
    c) To what extent is it possible to adapt as a foreigner, and to what extent are Finnish employees willing to adapt?

To conclude, upper management employees often obtain their position and power automatically, so to some extent it's easier for them to communicate and lead from their position without feeling the need to fully adapt. What comes to employees in international companies or subsidiaries in Korea, it can be easier for employees in more international companies to adapt as the company practices are often more similar to the home company's culture and practices. Especially in Nordic companies, following Nordic work legislation and practices helps employees to not feel pressured to follow host country's troublesome cultural practices. In contrast, for upper management Korean employees' kinship and third-party relations can be hard to manage as a foreigner. Further, Finnish employees in irregular jobs and Korean-style companies without foreigners, face everyday challenges related to hierarchy, communication, and work-life balance. Especially lack of yearly holidays, and rules and lack of autonomy regarding work tasks and communications, can be challenging for Finnish employees who have gotten used to more individualistic and laid-back working style. Moreover, it seems that Finnish employees are willing to adapt to some extent, but all informants wanted to also hold on to their personal values, like equality, or in upper managements case prioritize company's goals and work tasks over adaptation.

Results from this study correspond with previous studies in many aspects. First, according to Peltokorpi (2006), Nordic expatriates face misunderstandings because of difficulty to understand communication that reflects hierarchical differences and contextual cues. Similarly in this study,

many issues Finnish employees faced in Korea were largely relate to hierarchical organizational structures and practices that were not familiar to informants. This was prevalent especially in Korean-style companies where for example one had to be careful about the hierarchical order when contacting people. Second, according to Hofstede et al. (2010), in collectivist societies individuals are loyal to groups they belong to which was indeed seen for example in upper management's experiences on conflict situations with Koreans who did not want to betray a member of their group. Previous research also shows more specifically how collectivism negatively influenced intercultural communication among Nordic expatriates in Japan (Peltokorpi, 2007). Third, Hofstede et al. (2010) also mentions how in high power distance societies it can be challenging for employees to not be able to speak up their mind as it is often seen contradicting. This study also showed how especially in the case of regular employees, collectivism and maintaining group cohesion challenged Finnish employees' adaptation, for example when communicating directly was not the default. Fourth, research shows that in Korea, like in other high power distance cultures, employees accept mechanical structures better (Robbins & Judge, 2017, 293) and in collectivist cultures independency can be even seen contradicting (Hofstede et al., 2010, 67). Similarly, in this study, it seemed to challenge especially regular employees who had more monotonous work tasks and more challenges advancing in their careers.

There are also some aspects in this study that somewhat contradict the previous research. First, research seems to point that interpersonal relations are not as important for employment as before (Kim et al., 2013). Meanwhile this can be possible in some companies, personal relations and communication seemed to have increased importance in this study, especially in the descriptions of upper management. This might also be due to older average age within the company, which can further affect employees having stronger values regarding interpersonal relations. Second, research shows that language proficiency and cultural intelligence can predict cultural adaptation (Ng et al., 2025). However, these research results show that rather than language proficiency, being able to communicate at the workplace, even if it's in English or through an interpreter, helped adaptation. Third, previous research also shows that expatriates who had a host country partner had the highest increase in overall adjustment to the host country compared to expatriates who had partners from other nationalities (Davies et al., 2014). However, this research seems to show that other Korean nationals, like Korean colleagues, also played an equally important part in Finnish employees' adaptation to workplaces.

These research results can apply to other Finnish people at workplaces in Korea as long as the type of workplace, meaning weather the company is a Korean-style company or international company, is

considered. Even though organizational and individual differences in values can of course affect how a person adapts to workplace in Korea, I would argue that hierarchical structures and lack of individualism will most likely be the most challenging aspect for Finnish employees in all types of positions and organizations like seen from these research results. Future research might benefit from more detailed studies around upper management, leadership, and communication and conflict styles. Further, it would be interesting to focus the research on hierarchical structures and communication within companies from regular employees, or more specifically office worker's perspective.

There are some limitations to this study that should be kept on mind. First, as a first-time interviewer, it is possible that I was not able to conduct the interviews without any biases. Since all informants had very different backgrounds, irrelevant questions or inconsistencies might have affected the obtained research data. Second, the small sampling size is not quite sufficient to make any broader generalizations, thus we can only focus on individual experiences and possible factors that might be relevant in other similar cases. Third, even though I had thought of initial themes and interview questions based on previous research literature, the broad scope of this research might have affected the accuracy of interview questions and answers from the informants.

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Appendices

6.1 Appendix 1 Pre-questionnaire

(translated from Finnish)

PRE-QUESTIONNAIRE

Finnish Employees and their Adaption to South Korean workplaces

Kirsi-Maria Lepistö
Phone number
Email

HUOM!

- **In the case of currently not working, please answe the questions based on your previous work experience.**
- **You may answer the yes – no -questions by simply clicking the box.**

Please also fill and sign the ”INFORMED CONCENT FORM” on page 3.

1. Name _____

2. Age

20–29	☐
30–39	☐
40–49	☐
50–59	☐
60–69	☐
70–79	☐

3. Have you studied a degree in Korea? YES ☐ NO ☐

4. Are you currently working in Korea? YES ☐ NO ☐

Please write down 1) your **workplace(s)**, 2) **company size** (small, medium, big) 3) **length of employment,** and **4)** your **title**.

(e.g. company X, medium-size, 2 years, office worker)

_____

_____

5. Is your work
   Regular (e.g. permanent employee in a company) ☐
   Irregular (e.g. self-employed, part-time-, temporary- and fixed-term work) ☐

6. Have you done similar work in Finland? YES ☐ NO ☐

7. Have you worked in other countries than Korea and Finland? YES ☐ NO ☐

8. What is your Korean language level?
   No knowledge ☐ Beginner ☐ Intermediate ☐ Advanced ☐
   Professional ☐

9. Is your company/workplace in Korea
   Finnish ☐ Korean ☐ International ☐ Other ☐

10. What is your main working language?
    Finnish ☐ Korean ☐ English ☐ Other ☐

11. Are your coworkers mostly
    Finnish ☐ Korean ☐ International ☐ Other ☐

12. How many hours do you usually work in a day? _____

13. Do you work overtime weekly? YES ☐ NO ☐

14. Do you have regular lunch and coffee breaks? YES ☐ NO ☐

6.2 Appendix 2 Informed Concent Form

(Translated from Finnish)

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Finnish Employees and their Adaption to South Korean workplaces

Kirsi-Maria Lepistö
Phone number
Email

I have read and understood the *Participant Information Sheet* you have given me, and I agree to participate in the project. YES ☐ NO ☐

I understand that my participation is entirely voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason. YES ☐ NO ☐
I agree to this interview being audio-recorded. YES ☐ NO ☐
I agree to this interview being video-recorded YES ☐ NO ☐

I agree to be identified in the following way within research outputs
Pseudonym YES ☐ NO ☐

I agree my company/workplace to be identified in the following way within research outputs
Pseudonym YES ☐ NO ☐

_____ _____ _____
Name of person taking consent Date Signature

6.3 Appendix 3 Participant Information Sheet

Kirsi-Maria Lepistö
Phone number
Email

Date

Participant Information Sheet

Researcher:
Short Introduction

”Participant Information Sheet” is meant for you to give information about the research, the interview process, and processing personal data. This document is the official Participant Information Sheet of Center for East Asian Studies and is currently only available in English. Please ask if something is not clear. (Translated from Finnish)

Project Title:
Finnish Employees and Their Adaption to South Korean Workplace Culture

General Outline of the Project:

- **Description and Methodology:**
  The aim of this study is to research how Finnish employees adapt to South Korean workplaces. Research data will be collected through interviews. Interviews will focus on informants' personal views and experiences on adapting to South Korean workplaces, The promary language of this thesis is English, but the interviews will be conducted in Finnish. (Translated from Finnish)

- **Participants:**
  Data will be collected from participants who are currently working or have experienced working in Korea at some point in their lives and have shown interest in participating in this study. Around 5 participants have shown eagerness to participate, and as for now, will be interviewed during spring 2025.

- **Use of Data:**
  Results of the research will be published in due time after completion of the thesis in University of Turku's UTUPub Database (https://www.utupub.fi) where the thesis or its abstract can be found under the author's name.

Participant Involvement:

- **Voluntary Participation & Withdrawal:**
  Participants have the right to ask additional information about this study. Participation in the interviews is **voluntary** and you may decline to take part or withdraw from this research without negative consequences or without providing an explanation at any time. You can refuse to answer any question. If you decide to withdraw, the data collected from you will be immediately destroyed and not used for this or any other research.

- **What participation in this research entails:**
  In-person interviews will be audio-recorded and interviews through Zoom will be video-recorded. Zoom video-recordings will be used in Zoom interviews to create similar face-to-

face interaction as with people interviewed in person. Video-recordings will **only** be used to obtain the audio from the video-recordings and to transcribe audio into text form. If the participant who is arranged to participate in the study through Zoom interview does not consent to video-recording, the participant may have their camera off in which case only audio-recording of Zoom will be obtained during the interview.

- **Location and Duration:**
  Participants will undertake approximately an hour-long interview either in person or through Zoom, depending on what was decided with the participant. In-person interviews will be conducted in a place the participant suggests (e.g. café etc.). However, the interviewer has also arranged a semi-public place for interviews, in case the participant wants to be interviewed in a more private and quite place.

- **Risks:**
  One risk that should be considered is third-party identification, meaning that participants might be identified by what they tell during the interview despite my best efforts to hide their identities. However, I will take all possible precautions to make sure all data is safely stored, and the identity of participants will not be identified through the published research paper or other materials obtained during the interview process.

- **Benefits:**
  It is unlikely that you will personally benefit from participating in this research. However, I hope this research will help us understand better what might be some challenges Finnish employees face when trying to integrate to Korean workplaces. And in contrast, whether there are some cultural similarities that might help them integrate to Korean workplace culture. Knowledge gained from this research can be used for further research as well as training Finnish employees who plan to work in Korea. If you are curious about the research results, you may request me to send them to you after the completion of the thesis.

Confidentiality:

- I will use my best efforts to keep your information confidential by using pseudonyms both for the participants as well as for the companies and workplaces to ensure no information can be connected to the participants. Specific age, or other information that might be recognizable will not be published. I will be the only person accessing audio- and video-recordings, and any other materials related to this study. Recordings and other materials with participants' personal information will be safely stored in Turku University's storage system *Seafile* (https://seafile.utu.fi), and the information will only be accessed through my personal computer. Further, you can also specify if something personal comes up during the interview that you do not wish to be mentioned in the publication.

Storing, archiving, further use and possible access to the research data:

- Personal data obtained from participants before, during, and possibly after the interviews will be stored on Turku University's *Seafile* during collection, analysis and preparation of results.
- The data will be destroyed after publication of the thesis on UTU Volter, and not used for any future projects. Further, all other messaging with participants will be deleted as soon as convenient or no later than after the publication of the thesis.

Processing of personal data in the research: Please refer to the attached Privacy Sheet for detailed information.

Queries and Concerns:

- If you have queries on the project or any other concerns, you can contact my supervisor. (Supervisor's contact information)

6.4 Appendix 4 Interview Questionnaire

(Translated from Finnish)

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS –FINNISH EMPLOYEES AND THEIR ADAPTION TO KOREAN WORKPLACE CULTURE

BACKGROUND

1. **Could you briefly describe your typical day at work?**
   - What is your role and what responsibilities do you have?
2. **What type of knowledge you had about Korean workplace culture before you started working in Korea?** (e.g. knowledge from school etc.)
   - Has that knowledge helped you to integrate to your workplace?
3. **Do you have a partner, family, or friends in Korea? Have they somehow helped you integrate to work life in Korea?** (e.g. when applying for jobs, during issues etc.
   - What about other social networks, did someone else help you to adapt to the workplace culture? (e.g. colleagues, boss etc.)

WILLINGNESS TO ADAPT

4. **Is it important for you to adapt to your workplace?** Why is that?
   - Work itself vs. the social environment
5. **What type of worker do you think is valued in your company/workplace?** (E.g. someone who gets along with colleagues, takes orders well, works overtime etc.)
   - Have you changed somehow to fit this idea?
6. **Could you share an example of one cultural difference that has been challenging for you and how did you get through it?**
   - Are there some expectations, practices, or etiquette that you find challenging? (e.g. dress code, gift giving, greetings etc.)
   - What motivates you to work in Korea even though there might be some challenges?

WORK TIME AND WORK-LIFE BALANCE

7. **Would you say your work is highly structured or is there flexibility in what you do?** How do you feel about it?
   - Is there a time pressure? (e.g. task deadliness) or can you decide more freely what you do and when?
8. **What do you think about the work-life balance in your company/workplace?**
   - Do you feel it's okay to take a day off (e.g. during annual holidays) or go for a holiday (e.g. use official yearly vacation days)?
   - Is it easy to take a day off if needed? (e.g. to run errands or when you're sick etc.)
   - Do you have personal experience, or do you know if it's easy to take care of children while working? (e.g. how do people react to parental leave at your workplace, is it expected parents will come back to work as soon as possible)
9. **Does your company/workplace have outside-work activities?** (e.g. dinners, birthday parties or other activities with colleagues)
   - How do you feel about them?

CAREER OPPORTUNITIES

10. **Do you feel secure in your current job?** (e.g. labor agreement is fulfilled, and work conditions, regular income, work continuity, and healthcare benefits are guaranteed)
11. **Is it easy to advance in your career if you want?**

- Is it easy for you to get a raise in salary or promotion to different position?

HIERARCHY AND COMMUNICATION

12. Has your Korean level affected your integration to your workplace?

13. Could you give me some examples of interactions between you and other employees during a typical day at work?
    - Have you experienced situations in which communication has been challenging?
    - How do you communicate with people in lower and higher positions than you?
    - Does age make a difference in how you communicate?
    - Have you adjusted your communication style when working in Korea? (e.g. tone of voice, gestures, directness or indirectness etc.)

14. **Is it common for your manager/supervisor to give you instructions or are you expected to work more independently?** How do you feel about it? Can you describe some of these situations and how frequently they happen?
15. **Is it easy for you to ask further instructions when needed?** Why is that?
16. **Is it easy for you to express your opinions or suggest things?** Why?
    - How do you do it? And in what type of situations?
    - Do you express your opinions directly or indirectly? (e.g. in a meeting)

CONFLICTS

17. If you have an issue with another employee, how do you proceed?
    - Is there an intermediary you are supposed to go in case of a conflict?
    - Do you confront someone directly, try to convey the issue indirectly, or avoid the issue?

18. What if you have a different opinion than your manager/boss, how do you proceed?
    - What about with a closer coworker?

19. Has there has been any misunderstandings because of a language barrier?
    - How did you solve the situation?

EQUALITY

20. What aspects have perhaps made you feel like an outsider at work?

21. **Have you observed discrimination or harassment when working in Korea?** (e.g. because of sex, age, or background)
22. **How would you describe gender equality in your workplace? What about in previous workplaces in Korea?**
    - Do you think gender plays a role in career advancement or salary?
    - Do you know if your salary is average in your field? Is there variation within genders or nationalities?
    - In your workplace, are there tasks that are perceived as “men’s tasks” or “women’s tasks”?
    - Does gender play a role in workload or working hours?
    - Do you have personal experience, or do you know, if women in your workplace can return from maternity leave to work in the same position?
23. **Do you think you being a foreigner effects on how you are perceived at the workplace?** (e.g. are there different expectations or benefits for foreigners)

Would you like to add something to what we already talked about or is there something else that comes to your mind?

AND

What would you say to Finnish people who are preparing to come work in Korea?