

Article

Main Challenges of E-Leadership in Municipal Administrations in the Post-Pandemic Context

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Abstract: E-leadership (i.e., remotely leading employees) has become a new normal in the public sector during the pandemic. However, practices of e-leadership differ due to legal, national and even organisational conditions. A deeper analysis is needed to understand what has happened with leadership practices in municipalities after the COVID-19 pandemic. The aim of the article is to reveal the main challenges of e-leadership in the post-pandemic municipal administrations and to identify e-leaders' approaches (how they should act) in this context. A qualitative method of online focus groups was used to analyze specifics of the post-pandemic e-leadership in municipal administrations. The research was conducted in Lithuanian, Latvian and German municipal administrations. It was revealed that the use of remote work and e-leadership in municipal administrations after the pandemic heavily depends on the attitudes of supervisors toward work productivity. In addition, ensuring effective digital communication as well as managing social contacts and maintaining team spirit become challenges for e-leadership in municipalities after the pandemic also when remote work is reduced.

Keywords: e-leadership; remote work; leader; municipal administration; post-pandemic context



Citation: Toleikienė, Rita, Vita Juknevičienė, Irma Rybnikova, Viktorija Menzel, Inese Abolina, and Iveta Reinholde. 2024. Main Challenges of E-Leadership in Municipal Administrations in the Post-Pandemic Context.

Administrative Sciences 14: 88.

<https://doi.org/10.3390/admsci14050088>

admsci14050088

Received: 16 March 2024

Revised: 17 April 2024

Accepted: 26 April 2024

Published: 28 April 2024



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1. Introduction

Digitalisation of the public sector led to the emergence of e-leadership. E-leadership is considered as leading employees through information and communication technologies (ICT). Because of the COVID-19 global pandemic, ICT usage in the daily routine of the municipal administrations as well as e-leadership became mandatory (Toleikienė et al. 2020; Vilkaite-Vaitone and Povilaitiene 2022). As the pandemic period has changed processes and even forms of leadership, in the post-pandemic period challenging practices of e-leadership in municipalities remained or even increased.

The analysis of previous studies reveals some knowledge gaps in e-leadership practices in the public sector. Understood as the social influence process between leaders and employees using ICT tools, e-leadership has been mainly studied in the context of private organizations (Amorim et al. 2023; Ahuja et al. 2023). Previous studies give enough attention to the role of leaders (managers, supervisors) as well as to employee attitudes while working remotely (Cortellazzo et al. 2019; Alkhayyal and Bajaba 2023). The majority of public sector studies focused on specifics of e-leadership in educational organizations, which are not typical for other public institutions (Saraih et al. 2022; Azukas 2022; Karakose et al. 2022). Other studies focus on leaders' competencies, needed for the application of e-leadership in local public institutions (Vilkaite-Vaitone and Povilaitiene 2022; Susilawati et al. 2021).

Existing study results suggest that leaders are still challenged by the requirement and expectation to lead their employees remotely and using ICT. However, the specifics of e-leadership in municipal administrations after the pandemic are still under-researched. Considerations of e-leadership in municipalities in the period after the pandemic are seldom too. Because of that, the research questions of this study are as follows: How pandemic has affected e-leadership in public sector organizations?; What are the main challenges of e-leadership in municipalities after the pandemic as considered by supervisors and employees (case studies from Lithuania, Latvia and Germany)?; What are the main approaches of e-leaders while reacting to the challenges of the post-pandemic period? The aim of the article is to reveal the main challenges of e-leadership in the post-pandemic municipal administrations and to identify e-leaders approaches (how they should act) in this context.

Following the need to fill the gap of knowledge, the explorative study in Lithuania, Latvia and Germany was conducted. These countries are from different European regions (eastern, western) with differences in digitalization of the public before and during the pandemic as well as similarities of e-leadership practices before the pandemic (Rybnikova et al. 2022). To obtain the bottom-up approach to challenges, which are faced in the post-pandemic municipal administrations, focus groups with municipal supervisors and employees were chosen as the method for this study. The thematic (content) analysis was applied while analyzing qualitative data.

This article represents part of the results of the empirical research. This article consists of four main parts, including theoretical background, research methodology, results and the discussion.

2. E-Leadership Research

The pandemic had a significant economic impact on any country, in any economic organizational sector. As part of the public sector, the municipal administrations faced particular pressures and challenges during the pandemic (Deslatte et al. 2020). The pandemic situation inspired quick and creative decisions of the municipal administration, which generally contradict the principles of bureaucratic organization, such as steady rules, routines, and standardization. As the pandemic disrupted the education system, with the closure of schools and the shift to remote learning, municipalities had to provide digital infrastructure for remote education and supporting students' mental health and well-being (Saraih et al. 2022; Azukas 2022; Karakose et al. 2022). This led to accelerating digitization efforts, including e-government services, like enabling online access to various municipal services. Municipalities had also to provide support and resources to address mental health challenges, including home healthcare, counseling services and helplines. Ensuring the continuity of essential social services for vulnerable populations, such as the elderly and those with disabilities, was a priority for municipalities (Pöhler et al. 2020; Alshammari et al. 2022). Because of that, the COVID-19 pandemic has led to a surge in digitization and has brought new practices into the everyday work of administrations, whether due to the introduction of remote working, an increased digital citizens interaction, electronic record keeping, electronic procurement and accounting (Pöhler et al. 2020). These rapid changes towards digital services during the pandemic can be observed in particular in such countries like Germany where digital transformation has been a major challenge for public administrations for several decades (Bluth 2017; Sonntag et al. 2022; Döring and Löben 2023).

The analysis of previous studies reveals some knowledge gaps on e-leadership practices in municipalities as e-leadership has been mainly studied in the context of private organizations (e.g., Claassen et al. 2021; Alkhayyal and Bajaba 2023) or in the public sector areas that are distinct from municipalities. Existing studies on e-leadership in the public sector (Azukas 2022; Raišienė et al. 2023) claim that COVID-19 as a crisis has led to remote work as a major and rapid change in the work organization that provided new opportunities, but also challenges including mental and physical exhaustion and social

deprivation of remote workers because of blurred work–home boundaries, increased social isolation, a reduced sense of purpose and fulfillment in their work (Raišienė et al. 2023; Vara-Horna and Espinosa-Domínguez 2023). Leaders in public sector dealt with difficulties in communication, monitoring, and motivation when managing remote teams, therefore, COVID-19 period highlighted the importance of leadership behaviors, such as communication, feedback, trust, support, empathy, and encouragement (Jurníčková et al. 2024), but also of supporting organizational climates (Sciepora and Linos 2024; Allgood et al. 2024; Atobishi et al. 2024). Public sector employees had to look for new strategies to deal with their shifted role towards the entrepreneurial one, while leaders had to look for strategies to optimize the work design and invest in emotional authenticity and competency development to prevent burnout and enhance resilience (van der Meer et al. 2024; Barboza-Wilkes et al. 2024). Policymakers were urged to prioritize mental health resources to ensure equitable public service delivery (McCray and Rosenberg 2021; Armijos et al. 2023).

In the case of municipalities, remote working has also been the most notable change because of the pandemic, however, with a decreasing tendency. According to Siegel et al. (2020), the majority of employees are motivated when they are able to work from home, and the perceived attractiveness of their employer increases. The availability of technical equipment posed challenges to administrations during the pandemic, as did communication between employees who continued to work at their desks and those who worked from their home offices. Solutions were found, for example by forming crisis teams or introducing two-shift systems (Hirsch et al. 2021). Negative issues of working from home include the low accessibility of other service offices, the quantity and quality of services provided and the low efficiency of processes (Siegel et al. 2020). Because of the lack of personal contacts and the associated limited communication opportunities during COVID-19, talking about problems and the onboarding of new employees are considered difficult by managers (Lunge et al. 2020; Next:Public Beratungsagentur 2020; Liebermann et al. 2021). Few studies on e-leadership in municipalities show that multitasking as performed by leaders and employees is one debilitating, but ‘normal’ effect of e-leadership under conditions of crisis (Toleikienė and Juknevičienė 2019; Toleikienė et al. 2020; Toleikienė et al. 2022; Rybnikova et al. 2022).

In summary, research on e-leadership in the public sector already exists, whereas studies that focus on the specifics of municipalities in the period after the pandemic are rare yet. We still do not know whether supervisors in municipalities are still challenged by the requirement and expectation to lead their employees remotely. Thus, the empirical research, which was conducted in Lithuania, Latvia and Germany, was conducted to disclose the deeper bottom-up approach to e-leadership challenges, vital in municipal administrations.

3. Research Approach

We tackled the mentioned research questions empirically and conducted a qualitative study. In the following, we provide details on the method we used for data gathering as well as our procedure when analyzing the data.

3.1. Focus Group as Method of Data Gathering

Given that the research on e-leadership in relation to the specific context of municipalities is still in its infancy, although there are a lot of studies on e-leadership in other economic sectors, we decided to deploy the method of focus group. As a qualitative method of data gathering that addresses intimate experiences, understandings and meanings of people, focus groups allow for an exploration of new areas and topics (Wilkinson 1998). Moreover, through focus groups, different perspectives can be covered and analyzed in depth as long as participants representing different groups are involved and are encouraged to interact. Hence, in a focus group, it is possible to understand the differences in opinions and attitudes of the group participants as well as to simultaneously observe the collective sense-making processes (Wilkinson 1998). Because of that, the method of the focus group is particularly suitable for the exploration of new and understudied issues,

like specific challenges of e-leadership in municipalities and relevant factors that support the effectiveness of e-leadership.

We chose Lithuania, Latvia and Germany for this study as countries from the different European regions (eastern, western) and because of their differences in digitalization of the public sector before the pandemic, but similarities in e-leadership practices during the pandemic (Rybnikova et al. 2022). The qualitative method approach of the online focus groups was applied in municipalities in Lithuania, Latvia and Germany. Online focus group (Stancanelli 2010; Stewart and Shamdasani 2017) has many opportunities to create a social presence in the online environment and constitute a more convenient way of participation for the study participants, covering the members of the group discussion from different geographical areas and institutions (in this case—several municipalities in three different countries).

The researchers' team had a face-to-face working session to develop the focus group guide (the research instrument) that consists of four parts: the situation during the pandemic and the current remote work practice (post-pandemic); communication and motivation; work-life balance; training of skills and competencies. It consisted of 14 groups of open-ended questions. The focus group guide was translated into all three languages—Lithuanian, Latvian and German.

The study employs the purposive sampling technique (Burger and Silima 2006; Etikan et al. 2016), thereby following a threefold criterion for the selection of participants in various local municipalities: emphasis was given to middle-sized municipalities; participants of focus groups should be employed in the local government; at least part of participants should have experience of supervising in local government (see Table 1).

Table 1. Information about the focus group sample and the method application.

	Lithuania	Latvia	Germany
	5	6	5
Number of participants and the description of the sample	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - from one municipality in the region of the university - 2 supervisors - 3 employees 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - from 3 different municipalities - 3 supervisors - 3 employees 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - from 2 different municipalities in the region of the university - 3 supervisors - 2 employees
Presented departments of municipalities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - City coordination, - Project management. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Personnel management, - Organization. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Personnel management, - Organization, - Adult education.
Platform of online focus group	MS Teams	Zoom	WebEx
Duration of focus group	120 min	90 min	87 min
Language of focus group	Lithuanian	English	German
Time of focus group	May, 2023	September, 2023	June, 2023

Source: own elaboration.

All participants have “Participation and Data Protection Notice on “E-leadership in municipal administrations” study”, prepared by the researchers' team in three languages. Participants had the right to obtain the focus group guide in advance if preferred. They had the right to leave the focus group at any time, so voluntary participation was ensured for participants too.

The focus groups took place online via three different video conferencing platforms, according to participants' preferences—MS Teams (in Lithuania), Zoom (in Latvia) and WebEx (in Germany) and in the native languages of the participants, thus in Lithuanian Latvian or German. The duration of the focus groups was between 87 and 120 min.

3.2. Data Analysis

All focus groups' discussions were recorded, transcribed verbatim and content-analyzed, employing the thematic analysis approach (Brooks et al. 2015). To ensure confidentiality, the participants were codified, according to the country and number of participants: LT_1–LT_5; LV_1–LV_6; GER_1–GER_5.

To allow for a cross-country analysis, the research team developed a general deductive coding schema on the basis of the focus group guide. As e-leadership practices in municipalities are potentially marked by a high degree of country-dependent specifics, sub-categories were developed inductively to cover local particularities in another face-to-face working session of the research team. Examples of deductively developed categories and inductively emerged sub-categories are provided in Table 2.

Table 2. Categorization of results of the content analysis.

Category/Topic	Sub-Category/Sub-Topic
Most relevant change	Document management system Digital communication Distance learning Performance control Tools, used after pandemic Experiences from COVID-19 framed current situation
Activity	Supervisors oriented to digital tools Supervisors not oriented to digital tools Supervisor responsible for employees
Productivity	Understanding of performance and reasonable control Reasons of no effect/with the effect on productivity
Communication challenges	Professional socialization Consequences of pandemic on social relations
Motivation	Motivating forms appreciated by supervisors/employees Material/nonmaterial motivation Appreciation
Forms of dealing with burning-out	Individual responsibility to stabilize work-life balance Individual responsibility Support of colleagues According to rules and regulations
Training	Short official training Informal learning from colleagues
General expectations for leaders	More time to think and create ideas

Source: own elaboration.

4. Results

In the following, we showcase findings from the focus groups in all three countries considered. Since the knowledge of the municipal context in different countries is of importance when trying to understand challenges that result from e-leadership, the first part of the results points out the most relevant changes in the course of the pandemic as perceived by the participants of focus groups. We also present here different current practices of remote work in municipalities of the three countries. In the next step, we deal with the most relevant challenges that emerged from the data obtained, namely with employees' productivity, communication, motivation and team spirit and dealing with burnout among employees.

4.1. Most Relevant Changes and Current Practice of Remote Working

There are notable differences between the three countries studied in relation to what participants see as the main relevant workplace-based changes during the pandemic.

4.1.1. Lithuania

According to the Lithuanian focus group, the main aspects of e-leadership that remained after the pandemic were skills and capabilities to use different platforms of video-conferencing, usage of online meetings and tools if there is a need for short meetings and more oriented towards informing rather than the discussion. The previous pandemic experiences led to more issued regulations on how to ensure the standardized process, municipal administrations prepared different descriptions and rules on how employees must behave in certain situations: “< . . . > we have standardized more services so that it would be clear to everyone. Moreover, if we have some description, whether I’m sitting at home or I’m sitting somewhere else behind the screen, I open it, I carry it out step by step, it’s just less necessary to talk about it and discuss those individual cases there. Then more descriptions appeared so that I could work in ICT more easily” (LT_4).

Moreover, participants paid attention to the increased need for employee control, i. e. how to control an employee whose workplace is far from the institution and what measures to take so that the employee works during working hours and not after working hours: “I wonder what else has changed here. That question of control < . . . >. < . . . > when there was no pandemic < . . . > you can carry out that control even by observing how those people work and perform, while if it is said that some of them work somehow from home or elsewhere, then you have to look for ways to check that “remote”” (LT_5). Some decisions were made to prevent any abuse of working time and keep control of the productivity of employees as not all leaders believe that employees can complete tasks when they work remotely, yet it depends on the specifics of the work and the management style: “Returning home is not tolerated here. < . . . > If absolutely necessary, it is possible, but cases of abuse have been observed. < . . . > It was observed that people’s productivity is decreasing, that it is impossible to control people, that if work requires more creativity, < . . . > there are no measurement possibilities < . . . >. As a result of this < . . . > inability to control—people began to abuse” (LT_4).

It is important to emphasize that, according to the participants of the discussion, the wider use of ICT in the public sector would help to solve the lack of human resources: “< . . . > because we really need ICT, because we need a lot of work to be done, and there are few people. We see the assimilation and development of new ICT as the only chance” (LT_5).

Document management systems and cloud solutions have been introduced to establish digital work. The success of the systems used seems to be quite heterogeneous, since some of the participants mention massive problems because of insufficient stability and dropouts. Nevertheless, establishing digital document systems together with new technical equipment and digital conferencing tools has allowed remote working in municipalities to a degree that was not possible before the pandemic. As a consequence, nearly all employees have become familiar with remote working. When discussing the current remote working practices after the pandemic with the interviewees in Lithuania, we found that remote work opportunities for employees are defined by the law and are limited so few cases, such as illness, having children or taking care of relatives: “There is just for some, according to the law, either in case of illness or in such exceptional cases” (LT_1); “I go to work remotely in accordance with the Labor Code—it is stipulated that those who raise children up to eight years old. < . . . > I have a lot of that distance, actually, because the kids are small, I combine it a lot < . . . >” (LT_3); “have every right to work from home because I belong to the category of people who raise children with disabilities < . . . > but I don’t want to work from home” (LT_5). Remote working is not possible due to the specific job requirements, i.e., in relation to data protection. Supervisors in the municipal administration represent a position that employees are not allowed to work remotely except in the cases mentioned, so employees do not even ask for permission to work remotely. “< . . . > During the discussions, the employees expressed their desire to work remotely, but the managers have a different position < . . . > but some could and some would like to. But the position of the managers is different at this moment” (LT_2). In contrast to that, some employees think it is very difficult to balance it with raising young children at home and do not take advantage of the legal option to work remotely: “< . . . > I personally want to say this. I have every right to work from home because I belong to the category of people who raise children

with disabilities. <...> But I don't want to work from home" (LT_5). Employee, participating in the focus group, emphasized that remote work could be used to increase their motivation: "The remote itself is also, I think, a motivational tool, which you must justify yourself and not abuse. <...> But it's a pity that it doesn't exist, because I see it as one of the motivational tools" (LT_1).

Employees of Lithuanian municipal administrations have the opportunity to work remotely if they meet the cases provided by the law, but they refuse/cannot work remotely due to personal or leaders' attitudes. However, an important aspect emerged that remote work can become a tool, increasing the motivation of employees. The participants of the discussion indicated that remote work could be a suitable motivation tool for employees who cannot use the provisions of the law, i.e., do not have small children, or workers who take a long time to get to work. In the context of e-leadership, this insight is a very important fact, knowing that there are not many motivational tools in the public sector. Therefore, heads of municipal administrations should consider this and use it more often in practice as a possible motivational tool.

Focus group participants in Lithuania had different opinions about productivity when working remotely. Some said that they did not notice any changes in terms of productivity, while others said the opposite. According to participants, external stimuli (small children, family members to take care of) at home make employees withdraw from work and prevent them from achieving good results. Due to the multitasking and resulting difficulties to concentrate on one task, employees point to the decreasing productivity. Similarly, supervisors are concerned about the productivity of their employees too because of decreased control when working remotely, especially in case of tasks that afford creativity.

However, the opinion was expressed that the possibility of "flexible" work, i.e., planning the time of the day by the employee himself (and, of course, completing tasks on time) is a factor in job satisfaction. In this case, employees feel a great responsibility to complete all assigned work on time and not lose the trust of leaders. "*<...> As for work, I don't have burning tasks, somehow I manage to manage my work. And I have no complaints from the head, so I would say that everything is fine" (LT_3). Some leaders also agreed that the productivity of employees did not decrease when working remotely, and in their opinion, the most important thing is that tasks are completed on time: "<...> As for human productivity, at least in our department, I did not notice that anyone had changed in a negative way: everyone did the work that was needed, did it, got it done and worked. <...> It gets the job done, but it really didn't make any difference to us, I didn't feel it" (LT_2).*

4.1.2. Latvia

The most relevant change in Latvia is an increased sensitivity toward the need to be flexible and adaptable while maintaining a focus on effective communication, trust-building, and employee engagement. "*With the increasing reliance on digital tools, maintaining open and transparent communication channels is essential for fostering collaboration and ensuring that everyone is on the same page. Leaders must leverage technology to facilitate seamless communication and keep teams informed and engaged" (LV_5). Regarding trust-building, one participant highlighted its significance in remote work environments, stating, "In the absence of face-to-face interactions, building trust among team members becomes even more critical. Leaders must demonstrate integrity, reliability, and transparency in their actions to foster trust and create a supportive work culture" (LV_3).*

4.1.3. Germany

In the German focus group, the main changes in relation to municipal workplaces because of the COVID-19 refer to technological improvements. All participants noted that before the pandemic, the technological equipment that was available for electronic working was quite poor or did not exist at all. Because of the pandemic period and the requirement for social distancing, municipalities have massively improved their technological equipment allowing working from home. In particular, software and hardware required for video conferencing or for access to the municipal systems were provided; individual workplaces

have been equipped with laptops and additional displays. Regarding new software tools, employees have received extensive training. In particular, video conferencing is one of the main changes in relation to the pre-pandemic time. Participants point out that WebEx has become a usual tool when organizing any meetings until now.

Remote working was the dominant working mode during the pandemic in Germany. In the post-pandemic period, hybrid working has become the “new normal” in German municipalities. It concretely means that the usual mode of work is the blending between working remotely and working in the office. In the German municipalities, there are local organizational agreements on the way of practicing hybrid work (dt. “Dienstvereinbarungen”). They provide a formal framework that is obligatory for employees in a given organization. In most cases, remote work is allowed up to 50 percent of working time. Employees can apply for regular remote work for one to several days per week. The precondition of the application is that employees clarify with their supervisors how many and which days per week are suitable for them to work from home. Thus, employees are allowed to regulate remote work according to their individual preferences and task requirements. There are employees who explicitly prefer to work in their offices and employees who prefer to work from home. Although there are shared understandings among employees regarding which appointments should be better held online and which need their presence in the office, the heterogeneity of working mode in municipal departments remains the normal case and leads to the fact that there are very seldom occasions where all team members are in their offices.

4.2. Practices and Challenges of Communication

Digital communication provides some communicative challenges and misunderstandings for municipal administrations in the post-pandemic period.

4.2.1. Lithuania

In Lithuania, the relevance of formal communication with colleagues was emphasized. Participants identified a lack of communication with others. Remote work has changed social relations, and simply made them more difficult due to communication disturbances that have arisen, e.g., due to misunderstanding of the texts of the letters, etc. *“Analyzing the leaders’ relationship with the employees, it changed only with those closest in terms of position, while with others remained quite formal: “<...> My relationship is usually expressed in formal writing, <...> but, in reality, that relationship has changed little. (LT_5). Professional socialization was challenged by the culture based on the competition between departments, which influenced increased social isolation of leaders: “<...> Often during some meetings they already say: “I don’t want to single out a single unit here, but . . . I want to praise it. . .” <...> We want them to say that everything is fine with us here” (LT_4). Interviewees in the Lithuanian focus group emphasized the challenge of social isolation, which continues if remote or hybrid-working practices are used even after the pandemic: “That social relationship becomes really very formal, very tense one <...>” (LT_5).*

4.2.2. Latvia

In Latvia, participants point to the challenges of fostering “a sense of belonging and collaboration among employees who were suddenly isolated” (LV_2) as faced by leaders. There are explicit expectations towards leaders regarding clear communication, feedback mechanisms and the use of collaboration tools. Employees expect that a clear set of expectations for communication frequency, response times, and etiquette within the team are established. Employees wish that avenues will be created for team members to provide feedback on communication processes and suggest improvements. In regard to collaboration tools, Latvians would like to implement collaboration tools that facilitate document sharing, project management, and real-time collaboration to streamline communication and work processes.

4.2.3. Germany

Face-to-face communication is still considered by participants of the focus group in Germany as the most suitable way for any appointment. Digital meetings are seen as less appropriate for discussion-intensive topics and can be used in addition to face-to-face meetings or in cases where persons are separated by long distances. For example, as one participant explains, in their organization, job interviews with candidates are usually appointed as face-to-face meetings. Just for candidates from abroad they make an exception and arrange a digital job interview: “< . . . > We still use Webex regularly, I also have hybrid team meetings, but, for example, with selection processes, if possible, we try to do them in presence unless we have specialists, I don't know, we recently had an Egyptologist who we brought in from Cairo via Webex, so it's really worth it” (GER_4).

Communicative challenges due to digital channels, such as misunderstandings or interruptions because of technical reasons, represent one issue in the German focus group too. However, it turned out that there are structural ways of reducing the challenges of digital communication, like making coordination needless. Because of a clear task division, no additional communication and coordination is needed since everyone knows her or his tasks and responsibilities.

Nevertheless, participants point to additional and new challenges that emerge from electronic communication, like dealing with multiple communication channels. The supervisors in the focus group expressed their frustration about an increased informational overload because of heterogeneous communication channels in use, which include written as well as oral communication or information provided through different tools. One characteristic quote may illustrate the experience of supervisors: “I have to look not only to what comes through my door in the office, but also to what I have, for example, in the Webex chat, what I have via other media, so you have to start the day with a different level of attention and with a somewhat broader view as far as contact requests or communication requests are concerned” (GER_4).

These participants suggest that focusing on the few and most relevant communication channels would decrease informational strain and would allow them to remain informed and in touch with employees.

4.3. Motivation and Team Spirit

When it comes to work motivation and team spirit, both issues turned out as the main challenges of e-leadership also after the pandemic. Participants of Focus groups mention different attempts to deal with these challenges in their organizations.

4.3.1. Lithuania

Relevant tools of motivation in Lithuanian municipal administrations include monetary and non-material (appreciation) means and both are appreciated by employees: “Usually the motivation < . . . > is monetary, for sure, and the verbal one” (LT_2); “Bonuses and extras are the best. But of course, for sure, and my leader tells me if the task goes well. They will definitely praise and encourage” (LT_3). Some participants identified innovative ways of motivation, including such as taking part in conferences. Moreover, organizational events such as competitions or training are mostly appreciated: “There is such a tradition of announcing the nominations of the year” (LT_5); “In our case, we are asking everyone to motivate us with training and some < . . . > education” (LT_4). In addition, the financial support assigned not to the person but rather to the department as an award is one of the strongest motivation tools for active employees. One of the focus group participants paid attention to a very important issue, that despite the form almost all motivational measures have a price to pay from the organizational budget: “But those immaterial, they still have a material expression” (LT_4).

4.3.2. Latvia

In Latvia, motivation and team spirit are considered essential for maintaining productivity and a positive work environment, especially during challenging times such as the

pandemic. While motivation is supported by various tools, encompassing both monetary and non-material means, like verbal appreciation, theater tickets for the nominations of the year or opportunities for training and education, special tools for building and maintaining teams while working remotely were absent: *“No, nothing of them like that, apart from appreciation, as I have heard <...> any meetings, events, joint reviews of movies <...> did not take place. <...> There were Zoom meetings, some kind of conversations, but <...> something innovative <...> I can't be happy about” (LV_1).*

4.3.3. Germany

In the German case, maintaining social relations turns out to be one of the hugest problematic consequences of e-leadership and electronic communication. Because of digital communication and few weekly time slots where most of the colleagues could be met in their offices, participants of the focus group experienced social contact at the workplace becoming poorer and the social kit among employees becoming threatened. Among the participants of the focus group, there is an increased awareness regarding social relations at the workplace because of the hybrid mode of working. At the same time, participants mention manifold attempts on how municipalities try to support team spirit. One such attempt is a changed digital practice where the social part of online meetings becomes usual practice, with reserving part of meeting time solely for virtual coffee breaks: *“We also make sure that we still have time at meetings, where everyone gets a coffee or we start with a chat or end with a chat, so those who have to leave quickly have to go, the others can have a short exchange. So that is something that has really become important again” (GER_3).*

In order to support team spirit under the conditions of digital working and electronic leadership, social team events like birthdays, trips and excursions have become a regular part of workplace life in the post-pandemic period since employees use these occasions to meet personally: *“But we do things together as a team more often, like trips for example. My head of department likes to invite people to her farm once a year, at least once a year. Then we have a barbecue together or go on a bike ride together” (GER_1).* In the same vein, social rooms, when there are some, are used more extensively to meet for lunch or coffee break: *“We now also have a social room that is used much more, the lunch break, those who are there, who also really use it on site, not so much to do something in the city, but also to enjoy warm food with colleagues” (GER_3).* Moreover, where team meetings are held in presence again, they are celebrated with collective eating as one essential part of it, like the following quote shows: *“We now have at least half of the team meetings in presence again, always at different places, in order to get different impressions in the discussion. And that is usually combined with cake or breakfast before or after. It's official, but somehow it also has a private character before or after” (GER_4).*

To sum up, maintaining social relations among employees of a municipality has become an explicit concern of supervisors. We can see a kind of re-enacting of social rituals at municipal workplaces as an attempt to deal with this issue. This includes rituals as practiced before the pandemic as well as new rituals initiated after the pandemic.

Asked about how municipalities ensure work performance in the case of remote work, participants of the focus group in Germany responded that this is not an issue anymore because of different reasons. One of them is a general trust in employees' integrity as the statement of one supervisor shows: *“So, I approach it with the basic confidence that all those who have applied for it [remote work], where it is suitable, will do so with the same reliability, honesty and productivity as if they had stayed in the office” (GER_4).*

Moreover, participants report that they are performing rather better when working from home because usual disruptions like talking to colleagues are lacking. One supervisor confirms that when working from home employees perform rather better than in the office, since the supervisor observes more documented output. In his opinion, the reason for this is that by demonstrating more work output, employees try to justify home work as a legitimate and productive format and to avoid any insinuations. Moreover, given that in municipalities the document management systems are in use, supervisors refer to the fact

that these systems in fact monitor employees' performance since any task status and, thus, productivity of employees, are visible to the supervisor.

The remaining participants point out that they autonomously plan their remote work. In particular, they apply for working from home when their tasks are suited to be carried out remotely. As a rule, these are tasks that require quiet and concentration: *"The topic of productivity is not really an issue now. I save some work for home office days because I need a bit of peace and quiet. <...> Some tasks are just suitable for home office"* (GER_2).

In general, having an opportunity to work remotely is a motivational factor. However, participants underline that this opportunity is used by employees in a responsible manner. At the same time, the pure option of working remotely does not suffice as work motivation. Instead, participants of our focus group point out such motivating issues as providing realistic aims, giving concrete tasks, maintaining fairness in the team and providing individual feedback and appreciation by supervisors are much more important. Of particular importance is that supervisors consider the performance of their employees and provide prompt, even short feedback, in some cases a "smiley in WhatsApp" is enough. In contrast to this, missing feedback by a supervisor might be perceived by employees as ignorance, as the following quote demonstrates: *"What demotivates me a bit, which happens rarely and also not now, but with my previous boss sometimes, is that you send something and you don't get any feedback, because of course he's completely overworked and didn't have time. That's something like that, you think to yourself, I should hand it in by then, actually, and then nothing comes back and you don't even know if he's got it at all or not, that's sometimes a bit him"* (GER_1).

4.4. Dealing with Working Hours and Burnout

Given that such issues as blurred boundaries between the private and working spheres and overwork together with increased risk of burnout are widely considered in the research as consequences of remote work, there is particular interest in how these issues are addressed in municipalities of considered countries.

4.4.1. Lithuania

In the Lithuanian focus group, the issue of working hours and burnout was quite differently considered by employees and supervisors. The only way of dealing with burnout for some employees appeared the possibility to take some days out (vacation): *"<...> Most of the time, we solve all our problems somehow, in some way. If we really need a vacation, we go on vacation"* (LT_3). They do not expect anything from leaders and try to solve their own problems by talking with colleagues: *"<...>, well, you just "tell out the troubles" together, talk it out and it goes away, or if it's a serious situation—you try to solve it. <...> There are no other practices <...>"* (LT_1); *"If we talk about ourselves, I think that our leaders don't care if we are burnt out or not. We save ourselves. <...> I use my own practice: if I see that everything is over, I take one or two days off. <...>. And what about the leaders... <...> I don't know what they could do? Sympathize? No, I do not need that sympathy"* (LT_2). However, the participant-leader mentioned about personally trying to notice if employees are exhausted and withdraw them from the routine just for some moments or giving an opportunity to take some rest for half of the day: *"If <...> she is very exhausted, very tired, I tell her that she has to take vacation and she has to leave. <...> It is clearly stated here from above that nobody needs "sacrifices" here, you use your vacation to the fullest. And we have to get along. <...> But if we momentarily see that employees are tired, then I unequivocally say: "get out" <...>"* (LT_4). However, it is much more complicated if the employee is staying at home, while working remotely, it is impossible to notice burnout by the leader and it remains the personal issue of the employee.

In summary, employees believe that the leader cannot help the employee if he/she feels overworked, it is up to the individual to overcome this state. However, the leaders expressed a different point of view and even indicated what tools they use to help the employee overcome impending burnout: talking to the employee and showing some sensitivity; organizing some informal breaks (such as tea drinking breaks); providing (if

it is possible) free days off (depending on the job and department specifics); offering the employee to take advantage of the opportunity to receive a free holiday.

4.4.2. Latvia

In Latvia, employees and leaders mention that flexible work arrangements, like offering flexible work hours or the ability to adjust workloads to accommodate personal needs and reduce stress, might be helpful in dealing with burning out. Participants emphasized the significance of flexible work hours, stating *“Offering flexible work hours to our employees has been a game-changer in promoting work-life balance and reducing stress levels. By allowing our team members to adapt their schedules to accommodate personal needs, we empower them to take control of their work and personal lives, ultimately reducing the risk of burnout” (LV_2)*. As particularly helpful are considered clear expectations as they ensure that team members have clear job roles, reducing uncertainty, and preventing overload and burn-out. As one leader states, *“As a leader, it’s essential to ensure that each team member understands their role and responsibilities clearly. By providing clear guidance and setting realistic expectations, we can prevent burnout and foster a positive work environment where everyone feels valued and supported” (LV_3)*.

4.4.3. Germany

In the German focus group, the topic of working hours and burnout is primarily related to the legal country-specific and local regulations in municipalities that limit working time and place. For example, according to the German law of working time, working at the weekend is only allowed in exceptional cases and only upon the approval by the supervisor: *“For weekends, you have to get such a workflow approved in advance to work on the weekend” (GER_4)*.

Individuals are seen as personally responsible for their health and for maintaining their work capability. This kind of self-responsibility is considered as part of autonomy at work: *“< . . . > that employees are given a certain autonomy to say ‘Here, you are not a teenager any more, you know yourself and how best deal with working hours best, also within the framework of family and work’ (GER_4)*.

Nevertheless, what becomes obvious from the focus group, is the fact that supervisors are still regarded as responsible for the wellbeing of employees and they are expected to intervene when assuming overwork or health-related problems on the side of their employees. Supervisors consider themselves as first contact persons in that case and expect that employees clarify this issue with them in advance: *“That’s why I always say ‘guys, ask before and not after’. Sure, you can write me a WhatsApp on Saturday morning saying ‘Here, I have urgently to go to the office to pick something up’, then that’s fine. But otherwise I would like to know in advance, so that I could tell the employees: the weekend is there to relax and not to make the desk emptier” (GER_4)*.

5. Discussion

With our study, we aimed to identify the most relevant challenges of e-leadership in municipalities in the post-pandemic period. The results of focus groups show that despite some differences between the countries considered in regard to the current practices of remote work and, thus, the need for an e-leadership, there are a number of challenges that municipal employees are concerned within the post-pandemic period.

5.1. The Key Challenges of E-Leadership

In the beginning, we could state that technological equipment does not belong to the relevant challenges in municipalities anymore. A notable technological and digital progress has been achieved in municipalities during the pandemic; thus, employees as well as supervisors are provided suitable professional technological solutions for digital services and remote work.

Whereas technology does not belong to the challenges in municipalities, the organizational issues surrounding e-leadership still do. The consideration of employees' productivity while working remotely represents one such challenging topic that requires explicit consideration, even though the degree of importance differs among the countries considered. Whereas in the Lithuanian focus group, securing the productivity of employees turns out as one of the main supervisory concerns indicating that the frame of distrust seems to predominate here, in the Latvian focus group, the perspective saying that productivity can be secured when clear guidelines are provided prevails, and in Germany, the productivity is not an issue at all as participants argue that remote work seemingly leads to increased productivity among employees because of the absence of usual disruptions in the office. The balancing between control and autonomy while working remotely marks an essential challenging task for supervisors. The importance of the control issue was emphasized by other previous studies on remote working too (Pokojski et al. 2022; Pianese et al. 2023). We can observe on the one hand a stronger tendency towards "control" in terms of using concrete guidelines and directions to employees (to ensure work productivity when working at home—from the perspective of supervisors; to have a clear orientation in regard to expected performance—from the side of employees) and on the other hand, there is a tendency towards "autonomy" in terms of empowering employees to lead themselves when working remotely.

A balance between too little and too much communication turns out as a second challenging topic inherent in e-leadership in municipalities. On the one hand, social isolation among supervisors as well as employees emerges as a relevant consideration in the post-pandemic stage that calls for more intense communication between supervisors and employees. Social isolation is particularly fuelled by a competitive culture in municipalities and by the predominance of formal communication that undermines informal one. There exist strong expectations among employees of clear rules and regulations by supervisors in regard to the frequency and form of communication. In addition to that, employees express a strong need for increased feedback-oriented communication. However, using multiple communication channels is not an appropriate solution since it leads to a higher perceived stress and an informational overload. Hence, there remains a high ambivalence between the communicative needs of people and technological possibilities that calls for ongoing supervisory work of balancing between too little and too much informational input in their departments.

The findings support previous research (e.g., van der Meer et al. 2024; Barboza-Wilkes et al. 2024) in that they confirm dealing with burnout in the context of remote working in municipalities as an additional challenge. Findings from focus groups reveal, again, contradicting ways of dealing with the issue of burnout in municipalities: individual employees are considered to be in charge of their health, with organizations providing only a general frame for that, like in Lithuanian focus group, or the responsibility is mainly attributed to the supervisors and organizations, with participants arguing that burnout issue while working remotely is primarily an issue of working arrangements as provided by organizations, like in Germany and Latvia. In any case, supervisors are expected to deal sensitively with this issue.

One additional challenge that emerged from the results is the status of remote work as a rule vs. as a privilege in municipalities. During the pandemic, remote work in municipalities was mandatory, in the post-pandemic period the status of it changed from mandatory to optional. Current regulations regarding remote work are specific for countries and municipalities, with the result that in some cases remote work is allowed to any municipal employees, in other cases only a few employees, often those without physical citizens' contact, are provided this option. This increases the dissatisfaction of employees with the inequality of possibilities. Nonetheless, despite the strong increase in flexible working arrangements due to the pandemic, most organizational policies allow discretionary power for team leaders to grant or deny access to remote work, even if it strongly shapes reciprocal beliefs and social exchange relationships in teams (Chung et al. 2020;

Hartner-Tiefenthaler et al. 2023; Smite et al. 2023). Thus, remote work renders then the status of a privilege and of an immaterial incentive. One of the resulting challenges for e-leaders is the requirement to simultaneously lead employees independently from their place of work and to make transparent the criteria for remote work practice in order to address the potentially perceived injustice among employees.

A final challenge of e-leadership refers to maintaining social relations in teams and saving team spirit. Obviously, explicitly dealing with social relations among employees becomes a pivotal task of e-leadership in municipalities. It includes such issues as dealing with challenges of social isolation, addressing feelings of social injustice, and strengthening social bonds in teams and organizations. Supervisors acknowledge these as relevant fields of their activities and already try to explicitly nurture team spirit by introducing new rituals and celebrations or revitalizing social traditions in their teams, most of them not in digital channels.

All the challenges, identified in municipal administrations, provide some directions on how e-leaders should react when willing to lead employees effectively in the post-pandemic period (see Table 3). Those approaches of e-leaders include some specifics of ICT usage in public administration.

Table 3. Framework of e-Leadership Challenges in Municipalities.

Issues	Challenges of E-Leadership	Approach of E-Leaders
Motivation	Sustaining motivation	Discuss personal/professional needs, implement flexible motivational tools (including the increased possibility for remote work); expand legal conditions providing broader opportunities for remote work; recognize achievements and provide feedback (especially for employees, working remotely more often).
Communication	Maintaining appropriate communication	Establish digital communication protocols; train on digital communication; simplify communication channels (between leader and employees, the team and policymakers).
Productivity	Ensuring consistent productivity	Review work outputs, set clear performance metrics (approved by employees, leaders of municipal administration and policymakers); encourage self-managed teams and autonomy; leverage technology.
Work–Life Balance	Managing blurred lines	Implement policies for balance (flexible working hours, mandatory off-hours, approved by employees, leaders of municipal administration and policymakers); provide support services (mental health); regular check-ins.
Social Relations	Sustaining team spirit	Provide formats and time for informal team events on-site even when employees usually work remotely.

Source: own elaboration.

5.2. Limitations and Future Research Prospects

We should point to the main limitation of our study that needs to be taken into account. The small number of focus groups and participants allows for thought-provoking yet insufficient results when it comes to generalizations; hence, any conclusions should be considered cautiously. Our study provides explorative data that need validation by large-scale studies, be it qualitative or quantitative, to conduct valid cross-country comparisons.

Whereas our study provides relevant insights into the ambivalences and tensions of e-leadership in municipalities, the issues identified are quite generic and they mainly could be applied to e-leadership in private companies. Thus, there is a strong need for further in-depth consideration on whether municipalities are so much aligned with the new public management paradigm that differences to the private sector in regard to work organization and (electronically) leading employees are ceasing or, on the contrary, whether there are still nuanced differences that deserve to be taken into account.

Moreover, every challenge we figured out deserves to be analyzed separately, as it is of relevance for effective e-leadership, be it the tension between control and autonomy while leading electronically, be it the issue of achieving appropriate communication levels and ways. Especially the case studies as well as the organizational ethnography would be particularly fruitful when exploring the intricacies surrounding e-leadership in municipalities, i.e., by dealing with when remote working and e-leadership can become privileged or—contrary to that—ordinary in municipalities and what consequences can this have for the productivity and team spirit among employees.

In the case of prospective quantitative undertakings, a range of relevant variables should be taken into account that potentially frame the way e-leadership is practiced, like, e.g., type of organizational structure of municipality, employment duration, type of job conducted, the suitability of technical equipment, the social climate of the department.

Together with empirical undertakings, future research should also deal with conceptual models that could explain e-leadership in municipalities. As the previous models of e-leadership have dealt either with the technological dimension or with the social isolation of individuals, there is a need for improved theoretical models that would cover the fragility of team spirit under the condition of digital and hybrid work in municipalities after the pandemic. Given the fact that in municipal departments different work models (e.g., remote, hybrid, in the office) can exist simultaneously, maintaining team spirit is a particularly important task of e-leaders that requires specific consideration.

In practical terms, the competencies required by e-leadership in municipalities need additional attention too. What our study shows is that e-leadership entails less the “electronic” dimension, i.e., digital tools, and much more the dimension of traditional “leadership”. In contrast to what might be expected, our results underline that social leadership competencies, like clear communication, task division, feedback giving, and showing appreciation become even more relevant in relation to e-leadership and at the same time more difficult to exercise. Models are to be developed that ground the competence profiles of e-leaders with a specific focus on municipal contexts.

6. Conclusions

This study elucidated the complex landscape of e-leadership in municipalities. The findings demonstrate a critical need for municipalities to address specific e-leadership challenges including productivity management, communication efficiency, employee motivation, burnout prevention and team spirit maintenance.

The research highlights the importance of adapting leadership approaches to accommodate the dynamic nature of remote work and digital communication. In Germany, the proactive adoption of technological improvements has facilitated a more positive view of remote work productivity. In contrast, Lithuanian municipalities face challenges with trust and control in remote settings, indicating a need for developing trust-based leadership models. Latvian leaders are called to balance individualized support with clear communication to enhance productivity and engagement.

The research pinpointed specific challenges of e-leadership in municipalities that transcend generic issues, providing insights into how municipalities can adapt to post-pandemic realities. Notable findings include varying approaches to productivity management, the critical role of communication styles, and the need for a balanced approach to employee motivation and burnout management. These insights underscore the importance of adaptable e-leadership strategies that cater to both the technological and human dimensions of municipal administration.

Future research should focus on developing specific e-leadership strategies that incorporate these findings to support effective leadership in diverse municipal contexts. This could include investigating the impact of leadership training programs focused on digital competencies, trust building, and adaptive digital communication strategies.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, I.R. (Irma Rybnikova), R.T. and V.J.; methodology, R.T., I.R. (Irma Rybnikova), V.J., V.M., I.A. and I.R. (Iveta Reinholde); formal analysis, R.T., I.R. (Irma Rybnikova) and I.A.; investigation, R.T., V.J., I.R. (Irma Rybnikova), V.M., I.A. and I.R. (Iveta Reinholde); resources, R.T., I.R. (Irma Rybnikova), V.J., I.A.; writing—original draft preparation, V.J. and I.R. (Irma Rybnikova); writing—review and editing, R.T., I.A. and I.R. (Iveta Reinholde); visualization, V.J.; supervision, V.J.; project administration, R.T.; funding acquisition, R.T. and V.J. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research was funded by the Baltic-German University Liaison Office as supported by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) with funds from the Foreign Office of the Federal Republic Germany ((1.78) SU-501, 2023-03-13).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: Data are unavailable due to confidentiality restrictions.

Acknowledgments: We appreciate the contribution of all participants of focus groups, whose experiences and opinions are fundamental to the success of this study.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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