

LUND UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS AND MANAGEMENT

The Roads to Emptiness

An Analysis of the Influential Organisational Factors on and the Experience of Empty Labour by Office Employees in the Banking Industry



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Abstract

The phenomenon of empty labour gained considerable attention throughout the past years - mainly through its debate in public media and the introduction of the term by Roland Paulsen. We aim to contribute to the existing literature by adding alternative explanations to this phenomenon, as it is, up until now, mainly presented in a negative light. More specifically, we investigate how organisational factors influence the amount of empty labour of office employees in the banking sector and to what extent they experience this phenomenon as wasteful and “empty”. By answering these questions, we contribute missing perspectives to the existing literature, which only slightly touches upon these aspects. Using an interpretive approach, we conducted 19 semi-structured interviews in the banking industry. Our findings showed that the organisational factors of change processes, culture, and job design influence the amount of empty labour office employees working in the banking industry engage in. Moreover, we found that the phenomenon is mostly experienced as meaningful and, therefore, less “empty” than indicated by the majority of the literature. Since the organisational factors are likely to gain in importance, and since empty labour is perceived as a natural part of today’s working environments, we question the applicability of the concept to an incommensurable future.

Keywords: Organisational Behaviour, Empty Labour, Non-Work Related Activities, Knowledge-Intensive Firms, Banking Industry

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1 Introduction

Googling “not working at work” provides the interested person with more than four billion results, reaching from articles advising employers to prevent this behaviour to articles supporting employees to engage in it (Google LLC, 2019). Employees spend this time, amongst others, on taking breaks, responding to private phone calls, answering private e-mails, and using the Internet for private purposes (Paulsen, 2014). For instance, a survey found that 84 per cent of the employees respond to private e-mails and 90 per cent use the Internet for private purposes at the workplace (Vault.com, n.d cited in Lim, Teo & Loo, 2002), costing employers averagely one billion dollars (Lim, Teo & Loo, 2002). More generally, a variety of reports indicates that employees spend between one and a half to three hours per day on non-work related issues at work (Paulsen, 2014).

Even though engaging in non-work related tasks during working hours seems to be a public secret, literature about this phenomenon is widely missing. Among the exceptions to this is Roland Paulsen, who labels this workplace behaviour *empty labour* and defines it as “everything you do at work that is not your work” (Paulsen, 2015, p.352). While the phenomenon is not a recent finding, it becomes increasingly relevant – also in academic research – as a result of considerable media attention and the research of authors like Paulsen. Our initial interest in empty labour originated from this increased attention as well. In the following, we will, therefore, problematise the phenomenon and its consideration in the existing literature. Subsequently, we will present the purpose of the study at hand and the research questions, followed by an outline of the paper.

1.1 Problematisation

In the following paragraphs, we will problematise the phenomenon of empty labour and its consideration in the existing literature. We identified three main gaps in the existing literature on empty labour, namely the negligence of the influence of employees’ individual attitude and of organisational factors on the behaviour as well as its more positive experiences by employees. In the following, we will present these gaps in more detail and how we aim to fill them. Moreover, we will illustrate our methodological

differentiation from the existing literature, including reasons for focusing on the banking industry.

Concerning the research on causes of empty labour, the existing literature in this area seems to focus on rather apparent explanations. Instead of taking the individual attitude and organisational factors into consideration, the prevalent explanations for empty labour in the literature are employees' laziness (see Rothlin & Werder, 2008; Ketchen, Craighead & Buckley, 2008), boredom (see Eastin, Glynn & Griffiths, 2007; D'Abate, 2005; Bolchover; 2005), and resistance (see Garrett & Danziger, 2008a; Paulsen, 2014; Lim, 2002). As this constitutes a rather one-sided perspective on the matter, which only blames the employees, it is valuable to analyse alternative explanations. One alternative explanation might be the individual attitude of employees. However, due to the limited scope of our study, we decided against an analysis of this explanation for empty labour. Such an analysis would require close relationships with the interviewees based on high degrees of trust, which are impossible to achieve during a two-month period. In our study, we, thus, focus on organisational factors as an alternative explanation. By identifying these factors, we, therefore, contribute to the literature by raising organisations' awareness about their impact on the phenomenon. In doing so, we aim to provide an alternative explanation and to reduce the responsibility that currently lies mainly on the employees' side.

Regarding the employees' experiences of empty labour, the existing literature mainly focuses on the negative aspects of the phenomenon. The seemingly high occurrence of empty labour at our workplaces gives the impression of a considerable amount of wasted time during workdays. However, as especially the Generation Y aims to find meaning at the workplace (Hardering, 2015), this constant strive for meaningfulness represents an attempt to reduce the amount of wasted time at work. Moreover, literature has already slightly touched upon more meaningful aspects of empty labour (see D'Abate, 2005; Paulsen, 2014). In our study, we aim to analyse the extent to which office employees in the banking industry experience time spent on non-work related activities exclusively as wasted and, therefore, as an "empty" part of their day. By doing so, we attempt to add another perspective to the literature of empty labour and to question its rather negative connotations.

Furthermore, additional research in these areas is of importance because organisations are mostly advised to reduce the amount of empty labour. For instance, D'Abate and Eddy (2007) state that non-functioning employees – meaning that they engage in empty labour – might negatively influence the profitability of organisations. Observations like these can have severe impacts on employees, as organisations often punish them rather strictly for non-work related activities during working hours (Oravec, 2002). It is, thus, of highest relevance to study the organisational factors having an impact on empty labour and the benefits of the phenomenon to increase organisations' awareness in order to avoid hasty conclusions and punishments targeted against the employees. Additionally, the current literature merely focuses on the extreme cases of either working too much or not working at all (Paulsen, 2014). Moreover, existing statistics about empty labour provide little qualitative understanding and studies are mostly conducted in the shop floor environments (Paulsen, 2014). Therefore, we aim to contribute to this area by analysing the influential factors of empty labour in the banking industry and the experience of this phenomenon by regular office employees in this sector.

Additionally, the focus on the banking industry is of particular interest and relevance, because the development towards a more immaterial working environment influences empty labour (Paulsen, 2014). Despite this growing significance, research about employees' non-work related activities during working hours in knowledge-intensive environments is widely missing (Aghaz & Sheikh, 2016). According to Alvesson (2004), banks can be seen as an illustrative example for companies working in these environments, namely knowledge-intensive firms (KIFs). Furthermore, companies in this sector are interesting to study, as many of their employees are unconvinced of the meaningfulness of their work (Graeber, 2018). Statements like the one of CompUSA's CEO James Halpin that banks "don't add anything to the economy" (Puffer, 1999, p.35) are not a rarity and fostered our interest in empty labour in this industry. Moreover, researching in knowledge-intensive environments can be considered as especially valuable, as KIFs operate in a distinct and complex environment, which makes the applicability of existing studies from other environments, like shop floor settings, to knowledge-intensive environments difficult (Aghaz & Sheikh, 2016). Hence, our study attempts to reduce the lack of research by focusing on a specific office environment –

not only considering the influencing factors of empty labour, but also the experience of it by the employees.

1.2 Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

In this study, we aim to fill two of the gaps identified in the existing literature. By conducting our research, we will contribute to the common knowledge about the phenomenon by adding an alternative explanation in the sense of organisational factors influencing it. However, we do not claim that the existing explanations do not have an impact on empty labour. Instead, we add a new perspective, complementing and reinforcing the common explanations in the sense of Gilbert Ryle (Ryle, 1949 cited in Garrett & Danziger, 2008a). Moreover, we seek to increase the understanding of the phenomenon of empty labour by studying how employees experience it. We aim to achieve these contributions by focusing exclusively on the banking industry, as it is a highly relevant sector due to the increasing importance of knowledge-intensive environments. As our study focuses on employees' behaviour, more specifically their engagement in non-work related activities during working hours, our empirical findings will not only contribute to the literature on empty labour but also to the broader research area of organisational behaviour.

Summing up the previous paragraphs, we will, therefore, study the following research questions:

- How do organisational factors influence the amount of empty labour of office employees in the banking industry?
- To what extent do office employees in the banking industry experience empty labour as “empty”?

In order to answer our research questions, we will perform a qualitative study in the Swedish banking industry. We will contribute to the existing literature on empty labour, as our study is the first one to focus on the variety of organisational factors having an impact on the phenomenon. Moreover, in comparison to the existing literature, our study will elaborate on the experiences of empty labour, especially in connection with the literature on meaningfulness and stress. We will, therefore, provide the first study examining to what extent employees experience empty labour as wasteful or meaningful.

1.3 Outline of the Study

In order to provide the reader with an understanding of the study's structure, we will briefly introduce our line of thoughts in the following. We structured our study into six chapters, namely introduction, literature review, methodology, empirical findings, discussion, and conclusion. The introduction, constituting **Chapter 1** of the study at hand, already introduced the reader to the broader topic of empty labour and the problem related to it. Furthermore, it presented the research questions and the purpose of the paper. Following this, we will commence the main body of the study by providing an overview of the relevant literature in **Chapter 2**. We will not only summarise the existing literature in the field of empty labour but also relevant findings illustrating today's changing working conditions. This includes developments like *work intensification* and *work extension*, increased perceptions of stress, and the higher relevance of meaningfulness at the workplace. Following the literature review, we will present our methodological approach to study the phenomenon of empty labour in **Chapter 3**. **Chapter 4** will lay the foundation for our discussion, as we will introduce our empirical findings in this section. Combining the knowledge gained from the literature review and the empirical findings, we will continue by discussing similarities and differences in **Chapter 5**. Moreover, we will critically question employees' experiences of empty labour and the concept in light of today's working environments. In **Chapter 6**, we will summarise our main findings, present the limitations we were facing throughout the study and give practical implications as well as an outlook for future research.

2 Literature Review

The quotation "Never get so busy making a living that you forget to make a life" (Doyle, 2018) by Dolly Parton indicates that today's working environments and the employees' connected experiences of stress make it more difficult for them to keep a balance in their lives. As these challenges have increased in the last decades (Green, 2001), we will provide an overview of how the conditions of working have changed throughout this time. This development is critical to consider with regards to empty labour, as it seems to be a challenge to "integrate the phenomenon ... into the popular framework that speaks of *work intensification*" (Paulsen, 2014, p.7). Continuing our literature review by explaining empty labour itself, we will introduce the organisational factors influencing the amount of this behaviour and present its benefits found in the literature. We will elaborate on these aspects in the following paragraphs.

2.1 Development of Working Conditions

As the development of working conditions in the last decades is multifaceted, we will merely provide a broad overview of the elements that we consider as important for empty labour and our research questions. Based on the aforementioned note of Roland Paulsen on *work intensification*, we will commence by introducing the development of working conditions in the frame of information and communication technology (ICT). Furthermore, we will add the concept of *work extension*, which is also caused by ICT. We conclude this section by connecting these changes in the working conditions to the employees' experiences of stress and their increased longing for meaning.

2.1.1 Work Intensification and Work Extension

Researchers have identified two processes having an impact on altering working conditions and being related to ICT use, namely *work intensification* and *work extension* (Chesley, 2014). *Work intensification* can be defined as a temporary increase of "the extent to which employees have to deal with high work demands that force them to make use of their mental and emotional resources" (Franke, 2015, p.18). The term *work extension* describes the tendency of employees to work outside working hours and spaces (Chesley, 2014), which is also referred to as blurred lines between

working and private lives (Allvin, Aronsson, Hagström, Johansson & Lundberg, 2011). In the following, we will introduce the existing literature on these processes and link them to the employees' experience of stress.

2.1.1.1 Work Intensification

The relation between ICT and *work intensification* is supported by Green's (2004) findings that technological development, in general, is a relevant source of *work intensification*. More specifically, today's employees are facing a higher working pace and the requirement to adapt to organisational changes as well as to fulfil more tasks in relation to the time they have (Korunka, Kubicek, Paškvan & Ulferts, 2015). The authors argue that this increased pressure requires employees to reduce breaks and recreational time. Possible consequences of this development are "greater fatigue, stress and work-life imbalance" (Boxall & Macky, 2014, p.976). The literature, therefore, clearly indicates that the *work intensification* caused by the development of ICT positively influences the employees' experience of stress at the workplace.

2.1.1.2 Work Extension

While during the industrial age the boundaries between working and private lives were separated rather strictly (Thompson, 1968 cited in Fleming, 2005), they are becoming continuously more blurred nowadays – to the extent that private lives are absorbed by the working lives (Paulsen, 2014). This development is further supported by ICT. For instance, technological devices like smartphones and laptops enable employees to work outside their working hours and spaces and ensure the employees' constant reachability (Fritz, Lam & Spreitzer, 2011; Green, 2004). Furthermore, Kelliher and Anderson (2010) found in their study that these flexible working conditions, facilitated by the technological development, ultimately increase the *work intensification* employees are facing. Part of their findings is that especially employees working remotely perceive the need to constantly be available for the employer. Thus, it becomes apparent from the literature that ICT influences not only the *work intensification*, but also the *work extension* and that there is a relation between them.

2.1.2 Increased Perception of Stress

According to the literature, stress is embedded in today's working environments (Rothlin & Werder, 2008) – especially caused by *work intensification* and *work extension* (Chesley, 2014). The majority of the literature in this field utilises a rather negative definition of stress, for instance: “a relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his or her resources and as endangering his or her well-being” (Folkman, 1984, p.840). Basing their study on a negative definition of stress as well, Dewe and Guest (1990) identified six different strategies employees apply to cope with stress. Three of their strategies can be related to empty labour, namely *emotional release*, *recovery and preparation*, and *postpone action*. The authors describe *emotional release* as an instantaneous expression of stress and its articulation towards colleagues. Furthermore, the strategy of *recovery and preparation* enables employees to cope with stress by reconsidering a problem when they feel ready to do so (Dewe & Guest, 1990). The authors, additionally, define the coping mechanism of *postponing action* as reducing stress by prolonging or avoiding a task. Summing it up, stress has a considerable impact on organisations and their employees, as it is prevalent in today's working environments and, thus, essential for employees to cope with it.

2.1.3 Increased Longing for Meaning

The meaningfulness of work, which we will use interchangeably with the term meaning of work, is a widely discussed topic in the public media (Hardering, 2015). According to the author, especially the Generation Y aims to find meaning in their employment - amongst others in the form of self-fulfilment and personal development. According to Rothlin and Werder (2008), meaning, time, and money are the main factors contributing to employees' job satisfaction, which indicates that not only money and working conditions are important, but also the meaningfulness employees see in their jobs. Alvesson, Gabriel and Paulsen (2017) define three spheres of meaningfulness, in general, namely meaningfulness to the ego, to a specific group, and to the wider society. From their conceptualisation, it is reasonable to assume that the perception of meaning depends, amongst others, on the individual. This is further supported by Rothlin and Werder (2008, p.114), who argue that “what is meaningful for one person can be absolutely meaningless for another”.

Two ways in which employees gain meaningfulness at work is by an understanding of how their positions contribute to a higher purpose and by relationships at work. For instance, Steger, Littman-Ovadia, Miller, Menger and Rothmann (2013) state that employees have a higher probability of experiencing meaningfulness when they see a clear relationship between their work and an organisational or social benefit. Moreover, Veltman (2016) define relationships at work as one key dimension of meaningful work. Additionally, according to Hardering (2015), the employees' feeling of belongingness at the workplace constitutes an essential component of their perception of meaningfulness at work. Based on these aspects, we assume that the employees' constant striving for meaningfulness in their lives represents their attempt to reduce the amount of wasted time at work. This development is, therefore, worth to consider in the context of empty labour, as employees would unlikely engage in the phenomenon if it were entirely meaningless and, thus, "empty".

2.1.4 Sub-Conclusion

So far, we have outlined *work intensification* and *extension*, an increasingly stressful working environment, and employees' increased longing for meaning as changing working conditions having an impact on empty labour. For the study of empty labour, it is, therefore, particularly important to keep the employees' need for meaning at the workplace and their coping strategies for dealing with stress in mind. As the coping strategies involve different expressions of empty labour, they are especially relevant for questioning the "emptiness" of this phenomenon, which will be the content of our second research question.

2.2 The Phenomenon of Empty Labour

Considering the high relevance of empty labour in today's working environments, it is important to address the phenomenon openly and to study it further. To create a basis for elaborating on it, we will provide an overview of the main literature in this area. We will commence by describing the phenomenon, including alternative terms for and different forms of empty labour. Furthermore, we will introduce the most common reasons for the employees' engagement in this phenomenon, which the literature has focused on until now. We will conclude by reviewing the literature that provides reasons for questioning the "emptiness" of the label introduced by Roland Paulsen. A summary of the existing literature on empty labour can be found in Appendix A.

2.2.1 Description of Empty Labour

Empty Labour as “everything you do at work that is not your work” (Paulsen, 2015, p.352), is, amongst others, also termed *time waste* (Paulsen, 2014), *deviant behaviour* (Lim & Teo, 2005), *shirking* (Henle & Blanchard, 2008), *futzing* (Mills, Hu, Beldona & Clay, 2001) and *time banditry* (Martin, Brock, Buckley & Ketchen, 2010). There are mainly two exceptions to the mostly negative labels for the phenomenon, which add a rather neutral perception to it, namely *presenteeism* (D'Abate & Eddy, 2007) and *personal activities on company time* (Eddy, D'Abate & Thurston, 2010).

Paulsen (2015) identified four different types of empty labour, separated according to the dimensions of *work obligation* and *potential output*. Whereas *work obligation* can be understood as “the employee’s inclination to work within the frames of the firm regardless of collegial and managerial pressures” (Paulsen, 2014, p.61), the *potential output* is defined as the limited amount of work available in a job (Paulsen, 2015). Paulsen (2015), therefore, adds the forms *enduring*, *coping* and *slacking* to the classical form of empty labour, namely *soldiering*. While this classical form entails the intentional reduction of work, *enduring* can be understood as involuntary empty labour. Moreover, *coping* is defined as the recreational form and *slacking* illustrates the “perfect” combination between weak *work obligations* and low *potential output* (Paulsen, 2014).

One way employees engage in empty labour is by “using their companies’ internet access during office hours to surf non-job related Web sites for personal purposes and to check ... personal e-mail” (Lim, 2002, p.677), which is labelled *cyberloafing* (Lim, 2002) or *cyberslacking* (Vitak, Crouse & LaRose, 2011). The majority of the literature about the phenomenon of empty labour focuses on this specific type of behaviour. Even though our research also includes other types, we will incorporate the findings of the *cyberslacking* or *cyberloafing* literature in our research, since it is argued to be of great similarity (Garrett & Danziger, 2008a; Blanchard & Henle, 2008).

2.2.2 Prevalent Causes of Empty Labour

The literature on empty labour provides mainly four causes of the phenomenon, namely employees’ laziness, boredom, resistance, and their individual attitude. In the following, we will present an overview of these different causes.

2.2.2.1 *Empty Labour due to Laziness*

One common cause for empty labour prevalent in the literature is employees' laziness. For instance, Rothlin and Werder (2008) argue that teams consist of employees who are inclined to work more than they need to and of so-called 'under-achievers'. The authors further describe these under-achievers as employees who aim to avoid any additional work and who engage in empty labour during the time they gained. Moreover, Ketchen, Craighead and Buckley (2008) label those employees as *time bandits* and define their behaviour as intentionally stealing time from their employers by only working part-time for full-time pay. The prevalence of this cause in the literature becomes further apparent as Paulsen (2014) uses laziness as his point of departure for his research in the field of empty labour. Summing it up, employees' laziness is often depicted as one of the main reasons for the phenomenon in the literature.

2.2.2.2 *Empty Labour due to Boredom*

Besides employees' laziness, their boredom is often named by the literature as one reason for empty labour (D'Abate, 2005; Ketchen, Craighead & Buckley, 2008). The more specific literature on *cyberloafing* further supports this relation. For instance, Eastin, Glynn and Griffiths (2007) argue that the employees' experience of boredom positively influences personal ICT usage. In connection with boredom, empty labour is often described as the employees' reaction to meaningless work or to the fact that they have nothing to do (Paulsen, 2014). According to Graeber (2018), meaningless work is not only the result of a lack of meaning in employees' tasks but also the result of totally meaningless jobs, which he labels *bullshit jobs*. Moreover, Bolchover (2005) illustrates in his book that, in some cases of meaningless jobs, it does not make a difference whether the employees come to work or stay at home. However, most of the employees go to work either way and stay at their workplace long hours (Bolchover, 2005). According to the author, this is due to the psychological contract with their employers and due to their need to keep the image of being a dedicated employee. The literature, therefore, shows the prevalence of boredom as a cause of empty labour.

2.2.2.3 *Empty Labour due to Resistance*

Another cause for empty labour prevalent in the literature is that employees engage in this behaviour as a form of resistance. For instance, Alvesson observes in the preface of Paulsen's book that his research analyses the phenomenon mainly from the

perspective of resistance and agency (Paulsen, 2014). Furthermore, Rothlin and Werder (2008) state that the majority of the literature simply perceives empty labour as a form of employees' misbehaviour. This relation can also be found in the *cyberloafing* literature. Lim (2002) generally define *cyberloafing* as organisational misbehaviour. Further elaborating on this, Vitak and her colleagues (2011) found that employees are more likely to engage in *cyberloafing* when they perceive injustice at the workplace, for example, the feeling of being overworked or underpaid. Additionally, employees are argued to use the Internet for personal matters during working hours as a way of expressing their dissatisfaction (Garrett & Danziger, 2008a). The literature, thus, clearly indicates that employees' resistance is one of the leading causes of empty labour.

2.2.2.4 Empty Labour due to Individual Attitude

The last cause for empty labour provided by the literature is connected to the individual attitude. This way of reasoning is especially prevalent in the *cyberloafing* literature. It is commonly argued that employees' job involvement (Lieberman, Seidman, McKenna & Buffardi, 2011; George, 1992; Garrett & Danzinger, 2008) and their overall attitudes (Lieberman et al., 2011) influence their *cyberloafing* behaviour. However, besides the literature on *cyberloafing*, not much literature deals with the individual attitude as a cause of empty labour. Merely Martin et al. (2010) outline organisational commitment, conscientiousness, motivation, and self-efficacy as individual factors influencing empty labour. Therefore, authors like Eddy, D'Abate and Thurston (2010) call for further research on the influence of not only individual attitudes but also individual characteristics on the amount of empty labour employees engage in.

2.2.2.5 Sub-Conclusion

Summing it up, the literature in the area of empty labour mainly provides three causes of the phenomenon, namely laziness, boredom, and resistance, and touches upon the cause of individual attitude. However, some parts of the literature already indicate that contextual factors might be of great importance as well (Paulsen, 2014). For instance, Garrett and Danziger (2008a) state that *cyberloafing* is not necessarily a result of employees' resistance against the employer. Furthermore, Bolchover (2005) questions laziness as a cause of empty labour. Taking it even further, Rothlin and Werder (2008,

p.21) argue that “employees ... are made lazy”. These observations implicitly suggest that organisational factors might influence the empty labour behaviour of employees.

2.2.3 Organisational Factors Causing Empty Labour

Even though parts of the literature in the field of empty labour indicate the considerable impact of organisational factors on the behaviour, there is no study covering this exclusively. The literature that does mention organisational factors merely provides superficial statements instead of a profound analysis. To create a basis for our first research question, we will sum this literature up in the following paragraphs. We will structure the overview according to the factors of highest relevance, namely organisational culture and job design.

2.2.3.1 *Organisational Culture*

One organisational factor touched upon in the literature with regards to empty labour is organisational culture. For instance, D'Abate (2005) and Martin et al. (2010) argue that the cultural acceptance of the phenomenon in the organisation influences the employees' behaviour. The relation between organisational culture and empty labour is further supported by Oravec (2002), who observes that the culture is represented by the kind of empty labour employees engage in. Furthermore, based on two case studies, Townsend (2004) illustrates that organisational culture can influence employees' workplace behaviour. Providing a more specific example, Blasche, Pasalic, Bauböck, Haluza and Schoberberger (2017) found that the number of breaks employees take depends on the company. This also suggests that the organisational culture influences the amount of empty labour in the form of taking breaks. As one particular element of organisational culture, the literature indicates that supervisors can influence empty labour (Fritz, Ellis, Demsky, Lin & Guros, 2013; Lau, Au & Ho, 2003; Martin et al., 2010). Moreover, the literature on *cyberloafing* comments on the relationship between organisational culture and empty labour as well. It is argued that employees are more likely to engage in *cyberloafing* activities if they observe their colleagues engaging in this behaviour (Blanchard & Henle, 2008; Lim & Teo, 2005). Concluding, the literature brings attention to the relation between culture and empty labour. However, it only illustrates the influence on the kind of, but not on the amount of empty labour.

2.2.3.2 Job Design

Job design can be defined as “outlining the task, duties, responsibilities, qualifications, methods and relationships required to perform the given set of a job” (Business Jargons, n.d.). The literature in the field of empty labour identifies several organisational factors falling in the category of job design that influence this phenomenon. In the following, we will elaborate on the aspects of job position, job description in connection with employees’ feeling of contribution, lack of pressure, and flexibility.

Regarding the job position, the literature argues that the type of tasks and the way positions are structured influence empty labour. More specifically, positions requiring creative output have been identified as involving empty labour. For instance, Garrett and Danziger (2008b) found that information workers need empty labour to fulfil their creative requirements at work. Additionally, researchers argue that the way jobs are organised influences empty labour. To exemplify, Rothlin and Werder (2008) explain that shop floor employees have difficulties in engaging in empty labour, because of their predefined schedules and the measurability of their results. Therefore, the literature slightly indicates that the job position has an impact on empty labour.

The next aspect of job design worth to consider is the job description in connection with the employees’ feeling of contribution. For instance, Henle and Blanchard (2008) found that employees’ tendency to *cyberloaf* increases when having to deal with stress factors in the working environment, such as role ambiguity. As role ambiguity can be described as the absence of information about tasks, responsibilities and the measurement of outcomes in a specific position (Rizzo, House & Lirtzman, 1970), the literature suggests that a job description can influence employees’ empty labour behaviour. Connected to the degree to which outcomes of positions can be measured, the employees’ feeling that their position contributes to the organisation or their team has an impact on empty labour. To exemplify, Williams, Harkins and Latané (1981) argue that employees invest less effort at work whenever their contribution cannot be linked to the team’s output. Furthermore, Liberman et al. (2011) conclude from their study that a working environment, in which employees are aware of their contribution to the organisation, reduces the tendency of employees to *cyberloaf*. Thus, the

literature already suggests that the job description in connection with the employees' feeling of contribution influences empty labour.

Besides the job position and the job description in connection with a feeling of contribution, lack of pressure is indicated by the literature to influence empty labour. To illustrate this connection, it is worth to mention Rothlin and Werder (2008), who argue that employees are more likely to engage in empty labour if they do not perceive pressure – in particular, time pressure. Empty labour further seems to arise, since the ability of teams to use time effectively depends on the alignment of individual tasks and interactive tasks (Perlow, 1999). This indicates that employees engage in empty labour because their work depends on the work of others, which means that they are not facing any pressure until their colleagues have finished their tasks. Additionally, the absence of the supervisor can reduce the employees' feeling of pressure. This relation subsequently influences empty labour, which is supported by De Lara, Tacoronte and Ding (2006), who state that the absence of the supervisor has an influence on employees' *cyberloafing*. Hence, the literature suggests that lack of pressure, in the sense of lack of time pressure, dependency on others, and the absence of the supervisor, has an impact on empty labour.

The final aspect of job design prevalent in the literature is the employees' flexibility in the working environment. Employees' flexibility influences empty labour, because, as mentioned in the *work extension* paragraph before, it blurs the boundaries between working and private lives and provides employees with the space to engage in empty labour in order to balance these different lives. For instance, Lim and Teo (2005), referring to a survey by the University of Maryland, state that the flexibility caused by the Internet enables employees to engage in personal Internet usage during working hours. This is further supported by D'Abate (2005), who describes how employees engage in empty labour in order to balance their working and private lives. The literature, therefore, suggests that flexibility, especially in the sense of blurring lines between working and private lives, influences empty labour.

2.2.3.3 Sub-Conclusion

The existing literature in the area of empty labour identifies mainly the organisational culture and aspects falling in the category of job design as organisational factors having an impact on this phenomenon. Aspects of the job design having an influence include job position, job description and the feeling of contribution, lack of pressure, and flexibility. As illustrated in the existing literature presented above, research merely touches upon these aspects. Moreover, to our knowledge, there is no study elaborating on organisational factors influencing empty labour in more detail.

2.2.4 Positive Aspects of Empty Labour

As previously presented, the labels used for the phenomenon of empty labour and the term empty labour itself have negative connotations, indicating that this behaviour has solely negative consequences for organisations. However, Eddy, D'Abate and Thurston (2010) argue that there are positive aspects to the phenomenon as well. In the following, we will introduce the aspects prevalent in the literature, which suggest that empty labour can contribute to better working relationships and can provide opportunities for employees to take mental breaks.

2.2.4.1 Improved Working Relationships

Empty labour is depicted by the literature as being beneficial because it contributes to improved working relationships. For instance, D'Abate (2005) found in her study that employees engage in this behaviour as a way of socialising. The author further argues that this form of empty labour supports trust- and team-building, and the development of relationships at work. Additionally, Rothlin and Werders' (2008) example of Human Resource departments indicates that these departments perceive time spent on empty labour as beneficial, as it positively influences interpersonal relationships. This is further supported by Eddy, D'Abate and Thurston (2010), who state that empty labour creates space for employees to network, which subsequently increases their satisfaction and commitment. Moreover, organisations benefit from improved relationships as a result of empty labour. This is due to the fact that it has a positive impact on employees' performance through exchanging "information regarding their work in an informal way" (Lieberman et al., 2011, p.2197). Improved working relationships not only increase employees' satisfaction (Shamir & Salomon, 1985) and performance (Amabile & Kramer, 2007; Shamir & Salomon, 1985; Perlow, 1999; Fritz,

Lam & Spreitzer, 2011), but they also increase employees' emotional and physical energy (Fritz, Lam & Spreitzer, 2011). Additionally, empty labour in the form of social interaction contributes to the employees' ability to handle stress, because, as mentioned above, it is one possible coping strategy (Dewe & Guest, 1990). Some of the literature, therefore, shows indications of empty labour being beneficial, in the sense that it improves relationships at work.

2.2.4.2 Opportunities for Mental Breaks

Empty labour is portrayed by the literature as being beneficial, as it provides employees with opportunities for mental breaks. This is particularly relevant due to the changed working conditions mentioned in the first paragraphs of this literature review. The influence of the altered working conditions is supported by Baxter and Kroll-Smith (2005), who argue that naps during working hours are a consequence of *work intensification* and *work extension*. Illustrating this benefit of empty labour, Paulsen (2014) states that the phenomenon can be positively related to employees' renewal of mental energy. Furthermore, employees tend to practice empty labour in order to distance themselves from work (Dewe & Guest, 1990 cited in Aghaz & Sheikh, 2016). Breaks, in general, are argued to increase employees' productivity (Paulsen, 2014) and performance (Tucker, 2003). Focusing on blue-collar workers, Fritz et al. (2013) further support that breaks can have positive influences on performance. However, as we are interested in the banking industry representing a white-collar occupation, we regard these findings with caution. Moreover, empty labour in the form of taking breaks not only influences the employees' performance but also decreases their perception of stress (Greengard, 2000). Further evidence for this relation is provided by Dewe and Guest (1990), who describe this behaviour as a coping strategy for stress, which we already touched upon in the first paragraphs of this literature review. Additionally, regular breaks contribute to the employees' overall well-being (Sonnentag, 2003; Fritz et al., 2013). Summing it up, some parts of the literature indicate that empty labour is beneficial as it provides opportunities for mental breaks.

2.2.4.3 Additional Benefits

Adding to these major benefits discussed above, the literature provides some smaller positive aspects of empty labour, namely enabling creativity and facilitating the balance between working and private lives. For instance, Vitak, Crouse and LaRose (2011) as

well as Oravec (2002) mention creativity as one positive outcome of empty labour. This is further supported by Garrett and Danziger (2008a), who state that *cyberloafing* contributes to more creative usage of ICT. Furthermore, organisations benefit from employees' opportunities to balance working and private lives through empty labour. To exemplify, Nardi, Whittaker and Bradner (2000) argue that employees gain comfort by contacting their families and friends during working hours. D'Abate and Eddy (2007) more generally state that empty labour supports employees' work-life balance. Thus, empty labour is argued to enable creativity and a balance of working and private lives.

2.2.4.4 Sub-Conclusion

The existing literature on empty labour only slightly touches upon positive aspects of the phenomenon. Parts of the findings indicate that empty labour has positive impacts on organisations and individuals, as it provides opportunities to improve relationships at work, to take mental breaks, to enable creativity, and to balance working and private lives. However, to our knowledge, studies focusing on beneficial aspects of empty labour are still widely missing.

2.3 Identified Gaps in the Literature

The main gaps apparent in the literature about empty labour are the individual and the organisational factors having an impact on this phenomenon, as well as positive aspects of it. Even though the individual factors are an important and interesting aspect to research, we acknowledge that this would go beyond the scope of our study, as we would have to establish closer relationships with the interview partner. This is due to the fact that the topic is highly sensitive and would call for well-established bonds with the employees. As the literature on organisational factors merely touches upon them and does not focus on knowledge-intensive environments, we aim to contribute to the literature in this regard. Moreover, the existing literature on empty labour mainly considers the negative influences of this phenomenon. Connected to this, the small amount of literature that does consider positive aspects of the phenomenon entirely neglects that the perception of empty labour as being beneficial depends on the individual perspective. These are further gaps we attempt to fill with our research.

3 Methodology

In this chapter, we will provide an overview of the methodological basis of our study. We will commence by presenting the main aspects of our research approach, including our reasoning for choosing the hermeneutical tradition, the abductive form of logical reasoning, and qualitative research. Subsequently, we will introduce our research design, more specifically, our data collection method and process as well as our data analysis process. We will conclude this chapter by critically reflecting on the validity of our study.

3.1 Research Approach

Regarding the research approach, we conducted our study in line with the interpretivist research tradition. More specifically, we focused on the hermeneutical approach. Furthermore, the form of logical reasoning we decided to use is the form of abduction. Lastly, our study generally falls into the category of qualitative research. In the following, we will elaborate on these elements of our research approach and name reasons for choosing them.

3.1.1 Research Tradition

Considering the fact that generalisability is not of primary importance to us and that we instead acknowledge the complexity and uniqueness of workplaces, we adopted the tradition of interpretivism. We, therefore, followed the overall goal of this tradition to “understand [the] processes of subjective reality construction” (Prasad, 2018, p.14). More specifically, we aimed to understand the socially constructed realities of the banking employees, as we did our research in accordance with the notion that individuals merely know something as it appears to them, but not as it is outside of their senses (Burr, 2015).

These groundings subsequently entail implications for the conception of truth and whether employees adequately communicate the extent of their empty labour to us. We, thus, did not aim to detect the absolute truth, but rather the truth in relation to the employees’ discourses and the social processes in which the realities are constructed. This not only required us to detect relevant social influences but to also take into

account the aspect of language as the creator of reality (Burr, 2015). According to the author, language not only describes people's thoughts or a situation, but it creates something in itself. This, therefore, additionally guided our data analysis process.

Deriving from the interpretivist tradition, we further aimed to use the more specific practice of hermeneutics to make sense of the topic at hand. This research tradition is in line with what Alvesson (2003) labels a localist position on interviewing, as interview statements should always be considered in their social contexts. A central aspect of hermeneutics is the assumption "that the meaning of a part can only be understood if it is related to the whole" (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018, p.116). The authors further describe the hermeneutic circle as a process of moving between the part and the whole. This process is particularly relevant in interpreting texts (Prasad, 2018), which is not only applicable in our secondary research, but also in the analysis of our primary findings. This is due to the fact that Prasad (2018) also regards social interactions as texts in a metaphorical way. The author further states that, while analysing texts, the researcher's imagination has a considerable impact on the interpretation. Therefore, we attempted to keep this effect in mind while conducting our research and reduce it as far as possible.

We applied the hermeneutic circle in the sense that we interpreted the individual transcript parts and quotations, while at the same time considering their broader context. This context included not only the transcript as a whole, but also the interviewees' job position and the nature of their tasks. Besides considering the context of the individual employee, we attempted to be continuously aware of the knowledge-intensive setting we were researching in. Overall, we decided to apply the hermeneutical tradition, as it is argued to reduce culture-related misunderstandings in international environments (Prasad, 2018). This was of high importance in our study, as we conducted the interviews in English, which was neither the mother tongue of the interviewees nor of us as researchers.

3.1.2 Form of Logical Reasoning

We decided to use an abductive research approach as our form of logical reasoning, which is, according to Eco (1990 cited in Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018), in line with our selected research tradition of hermeneutics. The abductive form is comprised of both

an empirical basis and theoretical preconceptions (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2018). According to the authors, as opposed to pure induction or deduction, abduction requires more understanding of the researchers. This is due to the fact that it includes a continuous refinement of the empirical and theoretical material (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2018). The abductive approach, thus, helped us to ensure a high level of reflexivity throughout the research process. Additionally, it supported us not only to question the existing theories but also to understand the frames of references of our empirical data.

3.1.3 Qualitative Research Method

We decided to use a qualitative research method, as primary research in the field of empty labour is widely missing. This lack of research makes it more valuable to use a qualitative and, therefore, exploratory approach as opposed to merely testing hypotheses (D'Abate & Eddy, 2007). Furthermore, by applying a qualitative research method, we were not only able to use the concept of empty labour as well as the existing research as a basis for the interview questions but also to stay alert for unexpected topics that came up. This is in line with Deetz and Alvesson (2000), who argue that quantitative studies limit the possibilities to explore ambiguities at the workplace and in social interactions. As empty labour depicts an ambiguous phenomenon in today's workplaces and, amongst others, arises as a result of social interactions, we decided that a qualitative research method is most applicable.

3.2 Research Design

In the following, we will present our selected research design, covering the aspects of the chosen data collection method and process as well as the data analysis process. While the data collection method includes the type of the interviews and the sampling as well as our reasoning behind choosing the banking industry as our research environment, the data collection process focuses on detailed information about how we conducted the interviews. In the data analysis process paragraph, we will provide information about how we analysed the gathered empirical data.

3.2.1 Data Collection Method

Regarding our primary research, we decided upon a qualitative mono-method – meaning that we will make use of a single data collection technique (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009), namely semi-structured in-depth one-to-one interviews. For this, we established several criteria that the interviewees had to meet. More specifically, we focused on the banking sector as well as on office work and a minimum working experience of five years, in order to ensure that the employees already received profound insights into the working life. In line with our case study strategy, the interviewees were further chosen as non-probability samples, comprising an unknown probability of the cases being selected from the total population (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009).

In the following paragraph, we will specify the sampling process of our study. Firstly, we established a number of contacts in three different Swedish banks. Choosing this variety of banks enabled us to show the complexity of the phenomenon and to gain a multifarious analysis of empty labour. Moreover, by choosing three banks, we made sure that this study constitutes academic research rather than a consultancy report. Furthermore, we would like to point out that we did not aim to conduct a comparative study, but merely to get a more varied and complete picture of the phenomenon of empty labour. In accordance with Paulsen's (2014) research, the main challenge with regards to the sampling was to find interviewees who were willing to talk openly about the sensitive topic of empty labour. Some of the established contacts forwarded the interview request to their choice of colleagues, providing us with additional interviewees. We, thus, made use of a self-selection sampling, as we gave employees the chance to communicate their interest and their desire to be part of the research (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). In total, we conducted 19 interviews with office employees of three major Swedish banks. An overview of the positions and the working experience of our interview partner can be found in Appendix B.

3.2.2 Data Collection Process

In the following paragraphs, we will introduce the process we followed in collecting our empirical data. Commencing by presenting our approach to conducting our secondary research, we will continue by specifying the processes pursued regarding the primary research.

3.2.2.1 *Secondary Research*

In order to conduct our secondary research, we used Roland Paulsen's book about empty labour as a starting point. By reviewing his reference list as well as the according articles and books, we identified the gaps in the existing literature and, combined with our empirical findings, developed a clear research direction. For the purpose of using credible sources and gaining valuable insights from our secondary research, we mainly used the Lund University Library webpage. As research in the area of empty labour is somewhat limited, we included books and articles without any limitation with regards to the publication date. Additionally, we considered literature focusing on specific types of empty labour behaviour, like *cyberloafing* and taking breaks, in order to gain a broader range of perspectives.

3.2.2.2 *Primary Research*

Regarding our primary research, we will introduce specific details about how we conducted our interviews. In order to ensure the previously mentioned openness to additional themes not included in the literature, we aimed to conduct what Deetz and Alvesson (2000) call a loosely-structured interview. We followed our aim by attempting to engage in a conversation with the interviewees, instead of merely asking pre-established questions.

The 19 interviews we conducted with office employees from the banking industry were held in English and lasted approximately 45 minutes. Moreover, we recorded them in order to be able to concentrate on the interview partner and to be able to ask follow-up questions, to build trustworthy relationships, to consider the employees' body language, and to be open for non-expected themes. Furthermore, the recordings enabled us to subsequently transcribe, code and analyse the empirical data. Based on Paulsen's (2014) impression that employees do not have difficulties in separating work from other activities, we decided against providing the employees with a definition of work. However, we did present a definition for empty labour in order to describe it as a very natural phenomenon and to build trust with the interviewees. To gain responses that reflect the reality to the highest possible degree and to ensure the interviewees' spontaneity, we decided against sending the interview questions to the participants beforehand.

In order to provide an insight into our interviews, we will present some exemplary questions in the following. For instance, we formulated the question: “How do you motivate yourself to go to work?” to gain insights into elements that are meaningful to the employee. Moreover, asking “What do you see as contributing to the amount of empty labour you engage in?” provided us with the first organisational factors having an influence. Additionally, the interviewees’ responses to “Can you think of a time when you had to deal with stress or were facing a challenging situation?” in combination with the follow-up question “Did you feel the need for recreation?” already indicated some of the positive aspects of empty labour. As illustrated in the last example, we continuously included follow-up and probing questions in our interviews. To exemplify, we used “How do you cope with a situation like this?”, “How did that make you feel?” and “What was the situation?”. At the end of each interview, we generally asked if the interviewees would like to add something that we have not yet touched upon. Furthermore, we made use of silence for the employees to have the possibility to think and elaborate on their answers. Throughout the time we were conducting interviews, we continuously adapted our interview questions and added further ones. For instance, after recognising the employees’ rather positive experiences of empty labour, we expanded the existing questions by asking: “Can you think of any positive aspects of empty labour?”.

As the phenomenon of empty labour is a highly sensitive topic, we aimed to create an atmosphere of trust throughout the whole interview. In order to achieve this aim, we clearly communicated at the beginning of the conversation that we would anonymise their names and the name of the bank they are working for. Following the aforementioned interview style of having conversations, we commenced the interview by introducing ourselves as well as the study and by asking easy, open questions about the interviewees’ educational and professional background. This approach enabled the interviewees as well as the interviewees to get to know one another and to build trust.

3.2.3 Data Analysis Process

Throughout our data analysis process, we followed the activities of *sorting*, *reducing* and *arguing*, proposed by Rennstam and Wästerfors (2015). Falling under the activity of *sorting*, we will begin by explaining our coding approach and how we structured our data in appropriate categories. Thereafter, in line with the *reducing* activity, we will

describe how we discarded less relevant material and then, following the activity of *arguing*, how we put the phenomenon of empty labour into a broader perspective.

3.2.3.1 *The Process of Sorting*

In our *sorting* process, we followed the three coding steps identified by Corbin and Strauss (2008). *Open coding* is mainly about fracturing and taking interview transcripts apart in order to identify recurring concepts (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Using this approach, we, for instance, found organisational factors as a recurring concept in all the interviews we conducted. Subsequently, the more complex *axial coding* mainly concerns the creation of sub-categories (Styhre, 2013). Here, we identified more specific factors, such as organisational change, culture and lack of pressure. According to Styhre (2013), the third step, *selective coding*, involves finding links to the broader theory, which can be understood as the preparation for the above-mentioned *arguing* activity. To exemplify, the more specific category of lack of pressure can be linked to Paulsen's (2014) form of empty labour called *soldiering*. Throughout the process of *sorting*, we applied the computer programme ATLAS.ti to help us keep an overview of the empirical data. Furthermore, it enabled us to create networks linking the different codes, which can be found in Appendix C and D.

3.2.3.2 *The Process of Reducing*

In line with the *reducing* activity, we identified a number of other categories that we excluded from our data analysis. By doing this, we aimed to create "a more manageable set of data without ... neglecting the overall picture" (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2015, p.141). Concerning the organisational factors, discarded topics include the lack of direct supervision, the influence of open space work environments and administrative tasks. The two main topics left out from the second research question regard the positive aspects of empty labour in the sense of providing employees with possibilities to learn and with a feeling of control at the workplace. We reduced our data by excluding elements that were not as dominant in the interviews, and that did not directly answer our research questions.

3.2.3.3 *The Process of Arguing*

Through the activity of *arguing*, we aimed to provide additional explanations for empty labour and to broaden the initial perspective of a destructive phenomenon. Based on our interviews, it seems like the amount of empty labour is in fact influenced by many organisational factors and is experienced, at least by the employees themselves, in a less “empty” way. Moreover, as the “broadening of theory ... is just as important as naming empirical phenomena” (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2015, p.178) and Paulsen already introduced the term empty labour, we contributed by linking it to the fields of meaningfulness and stress.

3.3 **Validity of Our Study**

While more specific limitations of the methodology can be found in the conclusion, we will elaborate on the validity of our study in the following. In line with the interpretivist tradition, Alvesson (2003) cautions not to accept interviewees’ statements as the absolute truth. This is due to the fact that interviewees tend to describe their negative behaviour in a rather positive light (D’Abate & Eddy, 2007). Moreover, interviews should not be considered as the absolute truth since the interview partner might respond differently as a result of the interview situation, including aspects like power relations and subconscious anxieties (Paulsen, 2014). Furthermore, the validity of our study can be questioned because we as researchers influenced the interview situation and constructed a reality by interpreting the statements (Deetz & Alvesson, 2000). However, the authors further state that qualitative research provides more space to reflect upon these constructions.

In order to further increase the validity of our study, we followed the call of Schaefer and Alvesson (2017, p.11) “to be reflexive and (self)critical”. According to Alvesson (2003), reflexivity means considering different perspectives and avoiding an overly one-sided view. We ensured reflexivity by considering all the existing literature on empty labour and related concepts without limitation in order to include different perspectives. Moreover, we increased the validity of the interview findings by initially discussing our impression on the interviewees’ general sincerity of the answers. Lastly, we ensured reflexivity by continually challenging each other and by creating the possibility to develop ideas independently through the division of tasks.

4 Empirical Findings

In order to primarily answer our first research question, namely how organisational factors influence the amount of empty labour, we conducted 19 interviews with employees of three established Swedish banks. As mentioned in the problem statement, we aim to contribute to the gap in the literature by adding alternative explanations to the occurrence of non-work related activities at work. We identified several organisational factors, constituting alternative reasons for the employees to engage in empty labour and seemingly reducing the responsibility for this behaviour on the employees' side. Throughout our interviews, we recognised that the interviewees experience empty labour more positively than stated in the existing literature on the topic. We, therefore, started to question the "emptiness" in the label introduced by Roland Paulsen and formulated our second research question, namely to what extent office employees in the banking industry experience the phenomenon of empty labour as "empty". In the following, we present our findings according to our research questions. However, we acknowledge that our findings are intertwined and can overlap.

4.1 Organisational Factors Contributing to Empty Labour

Based on the 19 interviews conducted, we identified a high variety of recurring organisational factors that we categorised during our data analysis. While they are partly interrelated, we decided to group them quite strictly in order to ensure a comprehensible structure. This led us to three main categories, namely empty labour due to change processes, empty labour due to organisational culture, and empty labour due to job design. More specifically, we will introduce our findings concerning the influence of a change of the supervisor and empty labour due to increased adaption time and uncertainty resulting from organisational changes. Moreover, we will elaborate on the influence of culture in the sense that the supervisor, the team culture and the overall organisational culture have an impact on this phenomenon. Concerning the relevance of the job design, we will present our empirical findings concerning the job position, the job description in connection with the employees' feeling of contribution, the lack of pressure, and the flexibility. In the following, we will elaborate on these aspects in more detail.

4.1.1 Empty Labour due to Change Processes

Regarding the first category, our findings indicate that the amount of empty labour tends to increase during organisational change processes. For instance, one of our interviewees states that “[she] can guess that in the change process you will find a lot of empty work that [the bank] might not know about”. According to our findings, this relation arises mainly during changes of the supervisor and is influenced by the employees’ adaption time as well as their feeling of uncertainty. We will elaborate on these aspects in the following.

4.1.1.1 Empty Labour due to Change of Supervisor

Firstly, changes in the supervisor seem to have an impact on employees’ amount of empty labour. For example, this relation becomes evident in the following quote: “when [the bank] change[s] the boss, ... the efficiency and the working goes down“. Moreover, one office employee illustrates his experiences with this form of change by giving an example. Before getting a new supervisor, he reported to a temporary manager. He considers this period of frequent changes as “not [having] been so efficient“. Another interviewee provides an additional perspective on this form of change by explaining that “when [the bank has] a position out for a manager role, there is a lot of talks in between who [the employees] think would get the role“. Based on these statements, it is reasonable to assume that the amount of empty labour increases during changes of supervisors, for example, through more conversations between colleagues.

4.1.1.2 Empty Labour due to Adaption Time

Secondly, higher amounts of empty labour seem to occur as a result of the time employees need to adapt to new processes. For instance, one office employee mentions that “in [her] bank [they] have several organisational changes and it takes very much time for everyone to adapt to how to work and why and sometimes colleagues [do] not agree what to do and why“. Another one adds that “there is a lot of empty work ... because then [the employees] keep on doing the same things, that they think it’s right ..., but it’s not what we want them to do“. Moreover, one of the interviewees observes that the time to react to changes differs between the departments as “there is always culture and old routines and behaviours and more in some units than others that are so deeply [ingrained], people are so used to it“. Empty labour due to adaption time seems to be particularly prevalent in the banking industry,

because “change is constant and [the] industry is ... an old industry. So [the employees] are not so used to change”. The interviewee further comments on the communication of change that “you don’t explain it once and then you are done”. We, therefore, see empty labour appearing especially during organisational changes in the sense that employees need additional time to adapt to new processes.

4.1.1.3 Empty Labour due to Uncertainty

Thirdly, experiences of uncertainty during organisational change processes seem to lead to higher amounts of empty labour. We got the impression that this uncertainty arises, amongst others, due to shifting positions that are often part of organisational changes. For instance, one interviewee describes the interaction with her colleague in the following way: “she talks a lot because she is new in her role. And then it’s like lots of things that she needs to have support with”. This would ultimately increase the amount of empty labour of both employees. Furthermore, the importance of relationships to colleagues, especially during a change of positions, is illustrated by an office employee: “especially in the beginning, we are a bit confused and you don’t know everything. So, ... it feels secure to actually have a circle where you talk about stuff and what you don’t know, freely”. The prevalence of uncertainty during change processes becomes clear in another statement: “there is a lot of uncertainty and people ... still want to have ... deliveries but they can’t because the process is unsure”.

Based on our interviews, we found that experiences of uncertainty during change processes lead to feelings of frustration and stress requiring empty labour in the form of conversations with colleagues. Related to this, one office employee observes that during organisational change “it’s a lot of questions and sometimes ... [the employees] are very much stressed and angry and they get sad”. Another one further states that “if there is too much change and too much uncertainty, then you spend time being stressed”. The feeling of frustration becomes particularly apparent in a description of conversations with colleagues: “sometimes you discuss ... frustration and ... I think, now, when we are in this change of organisation, it’s been more important to discuss with your colleagues about that everything is changing”. Therefore, it seems like empty labour during change processes increases, because employees need to deal with the associated uncertainty.

4.1.2 Empty Labour due to Culture

Another organisational factor having an impact on the amount of empty labour of banking employees seems to be culture. For instance, based on our interviews, we found that the influence of the supervisor is of great importance. Apart from this, the amount of empty labour “depends on the culture both [of] the organisation [and] the team you are working in”. Therefore, we will elaborate on the influence of the supervisor, the team culture, and the organisational culture in the following paragraphs.

4.1.2.1 Influence of the supervisor

To commence with, our findings suggest that the amount of empty labour depends on the culture introduced by the supervisor. This is exemplified in the observation of one office employee that empty labour “depends on the people running the team and what they wanna do”. The interviewee further compares working with his two previous supervisors: “it depends if the manager smokes ... and all the people who also smoke with him seem to [be] ... this little gang of group ... And my old manager, she was Swedish, and she likes having Fika [Traditional Swedish coffee break for the purpose of socialising]. So, she always brought a lot of cake”. The supervisor, therefore, appears to influence the amount of empty labour the employees engage in, because – in the first case – only a small group of employees follows this form of empty labour, whereas the second case might be more appealing to a bigger group. Additionally, “the supervisor can also, not order, but maybe like say that ‘okay, now we’re going to have a coffee’ or something”. One other office employee also states that empty labour “depends on the boss. If you have a good relation with the boss, if there’s an open mind and everybody is free to talk, then there is a very open-minded mindset at the work”. The impact of the supervisor is further illustrated by a Contract and Vendor Performance Manager:

My manager doesn't have any problem with me managing my own time as I want, as long as things are done. To be honest, tomorrow I am leaving around one o'clock or two, so I am finishing my work at one or two and I am leaving to Poland for Easter and I am not taking a half day off. Because he knows that I already did what I was supposed to do.

The Contract and Vendor Performance Manager, therefore, engages in empty labour in the sense that she spends her time on non-work related tasks during working hours. Even though her supervisor knows about this, he does not interfere, indicating that he supports her empty labour behaviour. Hence, it is reasonable to assume that the organisational culture – influenced by the supervisor – is one factor having an impact on the amount of empty labour.

4.1.2.2 *Influence of the Team Culture*

Apart from the influence of the supervisor, empty labour “depends on the team as well”. One of the interviewees illustrates this dependency with an example: “people working in customer support, they come from ... the regular branches that I worked before and are used to these Fika routines. They fika. They are a little group in this group, but the client executives ..., they are very busy people, ... [losing] time on Fika is not for them”. The importance of the team culture for empty labour becomes clear in an example given by an IT developer:

In my previous team ... there was a football table. And we had our daily game if not sometimes two daily. So, definitely, that was costing me some more time when I was working. On the other hand, I keep saying that it's a very nice thing to have. Also, in a former company, I was living in Berlin before moving to Copenhagen and we used to have a football table as well. And I used to play a lot. I was not a full-time employee so I didn't have so many responsibilities, but I was still working there and I spent more time playing lots of football table.

This shows that “[empty labour] depends on the culture of the team, on what they see as empty labour and what they see as valid. Because they ... want to encourage that empty labour”. The amount of empty labour can, thus, be considered as a result of the processes and dynamics embedded in the team culture.

4.1.2.3 *Influence of the Organisational Culture*

Lastly, it is worth to consider the overall organisational culture. The relation between empty labour and organisational culture becomes evident in the following statement: “even if I appear at eleven and I am finishing at one ... no one will say anything about that”. The following comment on having Fika provides a more specific example of the

relationship between organisational culture and empty labour: “it’s not like outspoken, it’s not forbidden for us to get coffee. But it’s just a culture thing”. Adding to this, another interviewee states: “so, if you miss the Fika time, that’s the worst thing ever from the management point of view”, which implies that the organisational culture in this bank actively supports having Fika during working hours. Another office employee further illustrates that in his bank “there is not a negative attitude towards taking a break ... So, [the employees] are supporting to each others, that [they] don’t treat [themselves] that good”. Taking into account the general context of the interview, what is meant by this is that employees in his bank actively encourage one another to take a break and, therefore, to engage in empty labour. Another bank promotes this behaviour even more actively, as “most of the managers ... [have] five reflection days a year, that [they] can take. It’s paid time”. The managers themselves can decide when and how to use these days according to their personal needs. Based on these statements, the overall organisational culture seems to influence the amount of empty labour office employees in the banking industry engage in.

4.1.3 Empty Labour due to Job Design

Besides organisational culture and change processes, it appears that the job design influences the amount of empty labour. As mentioned before, job design can be defined as “outlining the task, duties, responsibilities, qualifications, methods and relationships required to perform the given set of a job” (Business Jargons, n.d.). We, therefore, included the influences of the job position, the job description in connection with employees’ feeling of contribution, lack of pressure, and flexibility under this term. In the following paragraphs, we will elaborate on the different ways in which those elements influence the amount of empty labour office employees in the banking industry engage in.

4.1.3.1 Empty Labour due to Job Position

The job position our interviewees hold seems to influence the amount of empty labour, because “the role ... sets the frame how you do [empty labour] and what to expect”. This influence is based on two elements, namely the type of tasks the employees perform and how the position is organised.

Regarding the type of tasks, we identified relationship-oriented and knowledge-intensive tasks as having a positive impact on the amount of empty labour. For instance, one office employee describes his role as being “the glue, or at least a spider in a spider web. It’s easier for people to talk to me if I’m there in person”. Empty labour especially seems to arise, because it takes time to build up relationships. This not only requires talking about work-related issues but also “to talk to a lot of people and find out requirements and generally chat to people ..., because some of the best information you can get is that you are sitting down for Fika with the people you are talking to”. Another interviewee illustrates this cause of empty labour by saying that he “spend[s] most of the time to get people together ..., to have people talk the same language and working towards the same goals”. The relationship-oriented tasks can be considered as relevant not only internally, but also externally in relation to the clients. This is exemplified by the experience of one of the banking employees that “you have to get under the skin of these people, and it can take five hours and maybe a dinner at night”. Additionally, knowledge-intensive tasks, involving the development of innovative ideas, give the impression to influence the amount of empty labour performed by employees. One interviewee elaborates on his need to engage in empty labour, “because it’s a thinking job”. Those knowledge-intensive tasks are described to involve “really rough scribbling, working out, doing rough ideas all the time and it’s really unproductive in a way ... it is really empty”. Thus, our findings suggest that relationship-oriented and knowledge-intensive tasks increase the amount of empty labour.

Apart from the type of tasks the employees perform, how the position is organised seems to be of considerable importance for the amount of empty labour. This relation is described by one banking employee in the following way: “the people on the shop floors and the call centres ... they have set times, so they don’t get the chance to do empty labour as much, they get set Fika time ... So, it’s probably in the middle, where I am, that you get more chance to do what you want”. According to him, in this case, the flexibility of the employees working in the middle of the hierarchy arises because “[they] are meant to tell [the management] what [they] can do, [the management is] not meant to tell [them] what [they] are meant to be doing”. In contrast to this, “at the retail branch, if [the employees] should have empty work, it would never work, because they are ... scheduled, they have ten minutes break and then it’s work”. This is further

supported by the statement that “it might be different if you look at regular bank branches ... They have to be in the office to answer the phone or take clients who walk into the office between certain times. So, there it’s probably completely different”. We, therefore, conclude that the way job positions are organised has a considerable impact on the amount of empty labour office employees in the banking industry perform.

4.1.3.2 Empty Labour due to the Job Description and the Feeling of Contribution

Besides the job position itself, the job description influences the amount of empty labour, because “the more empowered you are and the better you know what’s expected of you and what you have to do, the more productive it is”. Empty labour appears to be affected in two ways by the job description, namely when it is unclear or overly detailed. An unclear description of the job tasks seems to lead to a higher amount of empty labour, as employees have to orient themselves initially. For instance, one interviewee spent much time on getting “to know [his] colleagues and [his] organisation and asking them what they would like [his] role or [him] to give”. The following statement further supports this: “if someone ... doesn’t have a clear direction of what to do at work, it would make a person insecure or postponing things to do or not doing anything. Then it’s easy just to go on Facebook a bit more regularly”. Additionally, another banking employee experienced empty labour because of an unclear job description in the form of “unnecessary work ... [She] did many things that maybe weren’t requested, or they were unnecessary”. Opposed to this, a strict job description might increase the amount of empty labour as well. This is illustrated in the observation of an office employee that “in Stockholm [the employees] work more like in pipes, ‘I do this, and I do not do that ... and if I have nothing to do then I sit around’”. It is, therefore, reasonable to assume that a strict job description inclines employees to merely fulfil the outlined tasks and, upon completion, spend the remaining time on empty labour.

Moreover, the amount of empty labour seems to be influenced by the feeling of the banking employees that their work contributes to the success of the companies they are working in. This is connected to the clarity of the job description, which appears to influence the employees’ feeling of contribution. The connection is evident in the following statement: “the job description wasn’t bound, and it wasn’t anchored in the entire organisation. And that I felt, sometimes I felt that I didn’t contribute”. Another

interviewee emphasises the importance of a feeling of contribution in the following way: “responsibility is, I think, the most crucial thing. That I feel that my job is doing something for the company. So that my job makes the company go a bit further every day ... I should describe it like I do a difference”. Another banking employee further communicates this need: “I need to feel that ... what I do really contributes to the business. I need to deliver something. I need to feel that the work I am doing Monday to Friday is really contributing to the success of the company”. The consequence of a lack of this feeling is described in the following statement: “you need to feel that you are contributing. If you don’t, it’s frustrating”. This frustration, caused by the missing link between work tasks and contribution to the company’s success, seems to increase the amount of empty labour. An interviewee exemplifies this: “if I don’t really see how I contribute, I am more tempted to do empty labour, I guess. Towards just looking outside the window sometimes and just, you don’t get that energy kick to do [your tasks]”. Furthermore, another office employee “felt that [he] wasn’t ... being as challenged ... and learning new things each day. So then [he] would say that definitely [he has] one and a half hours [of empty labour] per day”. Therefore, when employees feel that their work does not contribute to the companies’ success, the amount of empty labour appears to increase.

4.1.3.3 Empty Labour due to Lack of Pressure

As part of the job design, a lack of pressure seems to influence the amount of empty labour positively. For instance, one interviewee observes in his own behaviour “that when things slow down, that’s when [he] get[s] good at procrastination”, which represents the *soldiering* form of empty labour. He further comments: “if things slow down ... the time can suddenly feel like ‘Oh, my God, do I have to do this?’ ... So, I need a lot to do to really be effective”. We identified different reasons for this lack of pressure, namely dependency on others, economic cycles, and the absence of the supervisor.

Regarding the first reason, it is well summarised by one interviewee, who states that “sometimes you have dependencies on others to do your tasks. You need to have other people perform before, and that could be a great empty work, definitely”. This dependency is particularly prevalent in onboarding processes, as described by a Solution Architect:

I'm working in a team in a project, and we have a lot of dependencies on our IT services or some group, which is setting up the access and privileges for us. And if those processes are not streamlined and if they take a long, long time, and we have onboarded a new person, then by the time that person gets an access, which is basically two to three weeks, then it will be very much increase of empty labour, because that person is waiting for that access and the set-up to be done.

Another interviewee adds: “[the new employees] have nothing to do because it takes a month or so for the computer to organise and the account and everything like that. So, we have to try and find them things to do and that’s really difficult”. Therefore, not only the new employee experiences empty labour but also his or her colleagues as they spend much time on keeping the new employee occupied. Adding another perspective, an interviewee further describes her job as depending “on [her] stakeholders and if they do not deliver data, [she] can’t basically work”. Thus, employees in the banking industry do not only depend on their colleagues, but also on external partner. Based on our findings, dependency on others can, therefore, clearly be identified as having a positive impact on the amount of empty labour.

Another reason for lack of pressure worth to mention is the dependence of the workload on economic cycles. For instance, “the general work level is lower in the summertime ... That also means that the empty labour will increase”. During these periods, empty labour seems to occur especially in the form of social interactions with colleagues and *cyberslacking*. This is illustrated by the observation that “there is more empty labour at that point because people have more time to talk to each other and to write personal e-mails”. Another interviewee further supports this by saying that “when we have calmer periods like in the summer ... then maybe people go fika”. Summing it up, “there are some ... periods when [the employees] are just sitting and doing nothing. So, it’s better ... to take the time for [themselves] and take it easy than just sit next to the computer for eight hours, because [they] need to be there”. Hence, if banking employees do not perceive pressure at work, due to economic cycles, they seem to engage more in different forms of empty labour.

The last reason for lack of pressure that we identified in our interviews is the absence of the supervisor from the office. For instance, one of the interviewees describes that “when there were few people at the office, people took more of the empty labour, you are doing stuff that wasn’t work-related. Like, I don’t know, making coffee or talking to others or stuff like that. Especially when the boss isn’t there”. Moreover, a banking employee explains the reason for empty labour in her bank in the following way: “it’s few of us working here that actually have our manager present here. Almost all of my colleagues here have their direct manager at another city ... maybe it’s because of that”. However, even if the supervisor is present in the office, this does not mean that employees do not engage in empty labour at all. This is illustrated by an interviewee stating that “[the employees] are more like trying to look efficient if the manager is present”. This expression of empty labour is based on the assumption that there is a difference between being and merely looking efficient. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to assume that the absence of the supervisor increases the amount of empty labour while his or her presence does not necessarily prevent it.

4.1.3.4 Empty Labour due to Flexibility

As the final element of job design, we identified flexibility as being correlated with the amount of empty labour in the banking industry. In the following, we will elaborate on flexible working time providing the space for employees to engage in empty labour. Furthermore, we will introduce the opportunity to work from home as a part of today’s flexible working conditions as one factor influencing this phenomenon. We will conclude by explaining how the fact that employees’ performance is mainly measured based on results can influence the amount of empty labour.

As flexible working hours seem to leave more room for empty labour, one of our interviewees also thinks that “[the employees engaging in empty labour] are using more ... the flex time as freedom”. Furthermore, flexible working hours support the tendency of blurred lines between work and leisure, which is also visible in an employee’s reflection on the definition of empty labour: “since you do work after working hours, where do you draw the line?”. Connected to this, another interviewee states that “[he does] not know how many hours [he] work[s] every week”, because he works from home, starts and ends his working day at different times and does not strictly document it. This statement, once again, shows that the flexibility, prevalent in today’s working

environments, facilitates that office employees in the banking industry engage in empty labour because they do not track the hours they work. This tendency is further supported by the technological development, as mentioned by an interviewee: “it’s so many possibilities to work flexible now with all the technique and Skype meetings ... sometimes it really doesn’t matter if I sit at home or [in the office]”. Therefore, the blurred lines between work and leisure, supported by the technological development, seem to provide more space for empty labour to occur.

Another factor adding to the tendency of blurred lines between work and leisure is the flexibility to work from home. Our interviews did not provide a unified perspective on whether employees engage more in empty labour at home or in the office. One interviewee observes that “when you are at home, it’s a lot of distractions, you don’t have your desk, you don’t have your full equipment, only the laptop”. Another one adds that “[he has] more empty work at home, because [he] get[s] a little bit bored and socially starved when [he] work[s] from home. So, what normally happens is that [he] take[s] longer breaks”. However, other interviewees observe that they engage more in empty labour in the office. For instance, one office employee elaborates on the difference between working at home and working in the office in the following way: “[in the office] you bump into people, you have this coffee ..., you go for a lunch in the restaurant with your colleagues. Working at home, I eat what is left over from yesterday, it’s done in ten minutes and then I go to work again. I mean, I think it is more empty work at the office”. Summing up the different behaviours with regards to empty labour, “it’s just different things. At home, it would be less social empty labour and at work, it could be more social”.

The relation between empty labour and flexibility at the workplace is further strengthened through the main focus on results when it comes to measuring performance. One interviewee comments on the way his performance is measured as follows: “the monitoring of my work ... isn’t on a clocking in and off point of view, it’s on deliveries. So, as long as [the management] get[s] those deliveries and we are there, then they don’t mind, actually, we can do whatever we want really”. Connected to the form of empty labour called *soldiering*, one employee notes: “if you have a deadline, you need to deliver results. If you ask me, my personal note, as long as you deliver in time, I don’t care if you spend two or ten hours on that”. Another perspective on this is

visible in the following statement: “if you have your calendar booked and you do everything that you’re supposed to do, I don’t think that management would be keeping an eye on exactly what you’re doing”. This links back to the aforementioned influence of the supervisor on the amount of empty labour. This phenomenon, therefore, seems to be facilitated through the focus on results as opposed to the hours worked.

4.1.4 Sub-Conclusion

Aiming to contribute to the existing literature on empty labour, we focused our interviews on organisational factors influencing this phenomenon. We found that the amount of empty labour office employees in the banking industry engage in depends on organisational changes, organisational culture, and job design. We, therefore, conclude that the responsibility of this phenomenon not only lies on the side of the employees but also on the organisational side. Thus, employees do not only seem to engage in empty labour because of laziness, boredom or resistance but are also led to do so as a result of a range of organisational factors.

4.2 Questioning the Emptiness of Empty Labour

Referring back to our literature review, the concept of empty labour commonly has a negative connotation, which is also indicated by labels like *time banditry* or *empty labour*. However, based on our 19 interviews, we got the impression that office employees in the banking industry do not experience empty labour as “empty” as implied by the literature. We identified mainly two positive aspects the interviewees see in the phenomenon, namely social interaction and the possibility to distance themselves from work. For instance, one employee expresses the importance of empty labour in the following statement: “I think [empty labour is] very positive. To have that moment, and I’m struggling to get them, and also struggling to feel that I really should take that moment. Even if I don’t really feel that I have the time for it because I think the brain and the body and for the stress, I think, it’s [a] good thing to do”. In the following, we will present our findings questioning the “emptiness” in the label empty labour based on the two positive aspects mentioned above.

4.2.1 Empty Labour as Social Interaction

Statements like “it’s a very social work today” and “it’s all about relations” point to the general importance of relationships in today’s working environments. Empty labour is perceived by many of our interviewees as contributing to the development and the quality of these relationships. For instance, one employee explains: “you get to know your colleagues if you are talking with them about non-work related stuff, you get to know your boss. I think that’s one of the most important things to get to know people around you, cause if you don’t do that, you will be just like computer to each other”. Furthermore, it appears that empty labour in the form of social interaction is not perceived as “empty” by the office employees, because it contributes to their well-being, their motivation and the functioning of the organisation. In the following, we will elaborate on these aspects in more detail.

4.2.1.1 Empty Labour Contributing to Well-Being

To begin with, empty labour in the form of social interaction seems to increase the employees’ well-being and is, therefore, not perceived as entirely “empty”. The importance of social interaction for the individual well-being becomes particularly apparent in the following statement: “The social context ... is needed for us to be at our best and be happy ... I would say it’s time well spent ... If you are only at work to be paid or for the work itself, personally I don’t see that as sustainable for the individual. You need to have something more to really feel happy at work”. Another interviewee supports this observation by expressing her view: “to get that question ‘How do you feel today?’, I think it is kind of important”. Additionally, an office employee reflects upon the conversations with his colleagues: “it might not be purely task-related, but it still improves my condition at work because ... I feel a bit more safe”. Talking about non-work related issues with colleagues, therefore, seems to contribute to the well-being of employees in the banking industry. Moreover, empty labour in the form of talking to colleagues can help employees to cope with stressful situations, which is visible in an example provided by a Cash Management Specialist:

But when I feel stressed about something, I usually call. And it’s good that I have this conversation with [a colleague in the same function] so we can ventilate. Cause we do exactly the same things and then we can reflect. Cause now she went to an office yesterday and the gang [employees participating in her

meeting] just sat like quietly. They weren't interested at all. And she had driven like four hours there and she was there one and a half hours and then she drove back. And that's a little bit tough ... So, it's good. You can ventilate things and you actually feel calmer after that.

In this situation, empty labour in the form of calling her colleague contributed to her ability to deal with the frustrating meeting. Additionally, empty labour can build or strengthen relationships with colleagues, because “it's fun to have Fika, it's nice chatting to people and seeing what other life they have got, ... so, it's nice having friendships and stuff at work”. From these statements, we can, therefore, assume that empty labour contributes to the employees' well-being through building and strengthening relationships because it is “one of the most important things for many people that they have someone to talk to at work”.

4.2.1.2 Empty Labour Contributing to Motivation

Besides the influence on employees' well-being, empty labour in the form of social interaction seems to contribute to their motivation. For instance, one of the office employees working in the banking industry states that “the colleague part is one of the most important factors ... what makes [him] go to work. If you could have the best ... job that you could think of, but if you don't have nice colleagues [he] wouldn't make it”. Based on the assumption that social interaction at work often includes non-work related issues, we conclude that empty labour in the form of social interaction increases the motivation of office employees. Furthermore, this form of empty labour seems to positively influence employees' motivation, because “maybe what you are delivering is meaningful, but working in a team and helping others is [more] meaningful ... A feeling like you [did have] a point of what you are doing because you are helping each other”. The meaning of the work is, therefore, enhanced through the opportunity to help others, which might ultimately increase the employees' motivation. We assume that helping others also includes empty labour, as it might not be directly related to the helper's tasks or work. The relation between empty labour in the form of social interaction and motivation becomes even more apparent in the following statement: “going to Fika and having good team spirit is good and that helps you do your work because you feel encouraged and enthusiastic”. Hence, it is reasonable to assume that empty labour in

the form of social interaction increases the employees' motivation and is, thus, not perceived as "empty".

4.2.1.3 Empty Labour Supporting a Functioning Organisation

The last influence of empty labour in the form of social interaction worth to mention is its support for a functioning organisation. Based on our interviews, we got the impression that empty labour facilitates collaboration between employees, because "if you don't talk to each other, if you don't know the other person, you don't collaborate as good. And if you know the person and if you have a kind relationship, you [collaborate] more". This collaboration is further supported through the Swedish concept of Fika, during which employees "solve a lot of things". Additionally, building trust has a positive impact on the quality of collaborations, which becomes apparent in the following statement of a Cash Management Specialist:

I just sat there and became a buddy with all of [the employees]. So that they feel comfortable with me, and that they feel that they can rely on me ... When we have met and they feel comfortable with me, then it is a big difference. Then I just mail or call them all the time. When we have gotten to know each other.

This statement illustrates that empty labour in the form of social interaction can influence the functioning of an organisation, as appears to improve collaboration mainly through building trust between employees.

Besides the building of trust between employees, empty labour in the form of social interaction seems to facilitate team collaboration, because "it also [provides] the opportunity for [employees] to get to know the other colleagues and that gives like synergy effects ... If you know someone in a private way, you have ... better opportunity to speak the same language when you are at work". Another interviewee believes that "the team feeling and the cooperation with the team is so important that it is actually more important to do [empty labour] a bit than do the actual work. Because if you are working in a team and you are happy with your work colleagues, it's actually worth much more". For instance, empty labour in the form of "talking to people [and] ... going to Fika ... makes a big difference how actually the team can function", because "if people feel left out, they feel not involved ... and it does really rack things if that

happens". A Business Controller further illustrates the importance of empty labour for team collaboration:

We have meetings where we just talk about 'How do you feel today?' and you're supposed to be able to talk about something difficult has happened, and just to be open. It's good if I know if my colleague's mom is really, really sick. We need to be able to talk about that. Then we understand each other to a much higher degree.

For the Business Controller, it seems to be especially important to be able to talk to colleagues about difficult topics, like a relative's sickness. She argues that this is of high relevance for a better understanding within the team. Empty labour as social interaction, therefore, contributes to a functioning organisation, as it seems to make working in a team more efficient. This becomes further prevalent in the following statement: "it's really nice being in a team and getting help ... and meeting people, other people's perspectives, cause that's what you need, you can't just come and make everything yourself".

Moving from the team to a broader perspective, empty labour in the form of social interaction appears to positively influence the collaboration between departments as well. It gives employees space to get to know co-workers from different departments, which is shown in the following statement: "normally I would interact with colleagues who are working within the same team or within the same area. So, we have some work relationship. But meeting others just like that or within the coffee area or for lunch, it would mean that we are just socialising with other colleagues and other different areas as well because in a big corporate it's more like we are small different companies within a company". This form of empty labour, therefore, seems to contribute to a functioning organisation by supporting a more unified organisational culture. Furthermore, departments might be able to share information and ideas through empty labour. An interviewee comments on this: "most of the interesting ideas, for me, that's normally coffee machine discussions ..., where you talk to someone about what they're doing. And you realise that that might be applicable on your tasks and your circumstances also. That's also why I wouldn't actually call the coffee machine visits empty labour. Those are probably one of my more productive things during the day".

Hence, we conclude that empty labour in the form of social interaction contributes to a functioning organisation by improving collaboration between departments.

Subsequently, the improved collaboration between teams and departments through empty labour as interaction appears to contribute to faster delivery of results. For instance, one interviewee expresses that “you get faster to the results if you have done those soft skills or have known each other better”. Moreover, another office employee compares results when working alone with the results from working collaboratively: “it’s more social and you can move faster as a group instead of everyone is sitting in very individual offices”. Thus, empty labour seems to contribute to a functioning organisation by enabling faster results as an outcome of better collaboration between teams and departments.

Empty labour in the form of social interactions appears to influence the functioning of an organisation not only internally, but also externally, as it can improve the relationship with customers. One employee expresses this clearly: “you have to get under the skin of [the customers], and it can take five hours and maybe a dinner at night”. This is of particular relevance for the functioning of an organisation, as “it is very important for [the bank] that [it has] happy clients, that they are satisfied with the service”. In order to achieve this, the employee “talk[s] a lot with [finance] departments at the client” and, therefore, engages in empty labour.

Summing up the aforementioned aspects, the interviewed office employees working in the banking industry do not perceive empty labour as entirely “empty”, because of its importance for social interactions. It is of high relevance, as it seems to positively influence the employees’ well-being and motivation as well as the functioning of the organisation.

4.2.2 Empty Labour to Distance Oneself from Work

In today’s dynamic and stressful working environments, it becomes more “important for people to have a balance” between work and time away from work. Statements like these lead us to the impression that empty labour is not perceived as “empty” by the office employees working in the banking industry, as it provides them with opportunities to create this balance. The possibility to distance themselves from work seems to be

especially relevant for the employees in order to reflect, regain energy, generate new ideas, and deal with challenging situations. In the following, we will elaborate on these aspects in more detail.

4.2.2.1 Empty Labour Enabling Reflection

Empty labour does not seem to be perceived as “empty”, as it provides employees with time to reflect. To exemplify, the following statement is worth to consider: “the time to think and the time to reflect on things is really important ... so that you are not under so much pressure and you feel like you have a bit of control. Because that’s really important for your feeling of well-being, that you actually have some control of the time you spend of the work you got. And sometimes that is just doing nothing, sometimes. You can’t be under pressure to deliver all the time, that’s not possible”. This is further supported by another interviewee, who states that “it is important to have people being able to have some empty work in order to refill or have some retrospective”. Empty labour, therefore, not only gives employees “the time to reflect”, but also to “look at, plan ahead and stuff like that”. The importance of empty labour as providing reflection time is emphasised in the critical note of an interviewee “that [he] should do more, much, much more [empty labour], because that type of empty work, [he] think[s], is really good. To have reflection time”. It is, therefore, reasonable to regard empty labour in the form of distancing oneself from work as a meaningful element in our dynamic and stressful working environments, as it provides employees with time to reflect.

4.2.2.2 Empty Labour Enabling Employees to Regain Energy

Office employees working in the banking industry do not appear to perceive empty labour as “empty”, since they “need these lazy periods to be more productive in other moments” and to, therefore, regain energy. These periods are significant, because “it’s really hard to just think really intensively all the time. So, you need to stop. And then your brain processes the information, and then you can do the next part of your intensive work”. To exemplify, an interviewee compares his working approach in his previous positions to his approach in his current position: “In the first two years in Copenhagen, I worked like crazy. And then I saw that I didn’t feel so good and that it was too much ... So, then I thought ‘This is not good’. So, the thing is when I laid back, now I perform much better”. Employees working in the banking industry use empty labour in the form of distancing themselves from work in different ways to regain their

energy. For instance, a Contract and Vendor Performance Manager illustrates this behaviour with the following example:

I used some of such time ... when [I had] a difficult day and [the bank has] on the last floor in [the] office ... this massage chair. And I just booked this chair for myself for 45 minutes, and I spent 45 minutes in the massage chair, because ... I need[ed] to listen to nice music and try to distance myself from the quite stressful day.

In this case, empty labour in the form of booking a massage chair enabled the Contract and Vendor Performance Manager to cope with a stressful day. Another interviewee states that “if [she] had like three back to back meetings, where it was too much stuff and too much stress at the same time, then [she] would require movement. And for [her], the best approach would be to take five minutes, go to walk – even within the office is fine. Just go to another area, new area, just take five minutes break. Sit down. Either listen to one song or something and then come back. It clears [her] head”. In fact, this form of empty labour is most “beneficial, when you don’t have the time really ... That if you are very stressed, that you have a lot of things to do. Those are the situations where you should take ten minutes, just go outside and talk to a colleague and talk for ten minutes and then come back. Because that will pay you probably 30 minutes”. Empty labour, thus, seems to be beneficial for the employees in terms of distance from work – providing the opportunity to regain energy and to work more productively afterwards.

4.2.2.3 Empty Labour Enabling the Generation of New Ideas

Besides possibilities to regain energy, employees seem to get the opportunity to generate new ideas through empty labour, because “just nailing down and slogging through the day ... hampers creativity”. The employees perceive those moments as particularly valuable when they have to solve problems and are looking for new ideas. For instance, one interviewee expresses that he has “always needed to take micro-breaks ... to switch context a little bit. What [he] normally [does] is go to the coffee machine. And then the problem [he has] been trying to solve for an hour that normally is magically solved by the coffee machine when you get distracted by something else”. Another office employee states that “sometimes you know that you just have to work

through a problem, and you are not gonna come through it immediately. So, you need to have a walk or do something else, so that you might have time to process and then come up with the idea afterwards". The following statement further supports this: "if you are doing something really hard, something you don't understand, you need, maybe I need five or ten minutes to just go through a newspaper or sign into ... Facebook or something and then get a break and then like get a restart. To get a bit fresh eyes to look at it". Employees, therefore, seem to perceive empty labour in the form of distance from work as valuable, because it provides them with the opportunity to solve problems and generate new ideas.

4.2.2.4 Empty Labour Enabling Employees to Deal with Challenging Situations

Based on our interviews, we got the impression that empty labour enables employees to better deal with challenging situations and that it reduces their frustration connected to these. One interviewee observes that through empty labour – in this case, communication with colleagues – "you can ventilate things and you actually feel calmer after that". Especially when "something went really wrong ... [another interviewee] feel[s] like [she] need[s] a short walk outside or just go down to the coffee house and grab coffee". To further exemplify, the following statement of a Key Account Manager is worth to consider:

Sometimes ... you lose the deal and get frustrated. Then, there have been occasions where I closed my computer at mid-day and feel I don't have the power to perform anymore today. 'Let's go home' and then I leave work, doing other stuff. That, you could say, is a refill, coming back to office the day after a hundred per cent powered again.

In this situation, the Key Account Manager had the space to deal with a frustrating experience by engaging in empty labour. Additionally, an office employee explains that "when the IT problems and IT systems don't work like [she] want[s] them to, then [her] patience is really short, like just be really angry. And then after solving something like this, [she] can just feel like 'Now I am worth a break', to go out and have a coffee or something like that". These examples demonstrate that empty labour supports employees to deal with challenging situations and can reduce the frustration they experience. Adding another perspective, one interviewee reflects on challenging

interactions with her clients that she “was made calmer [through empty labour]. So, it was easier to evaluate what the other side was talking and being more distanced, not so emotional”. Hence, we conclude that empty labour in the form of distance from work can be beneficial for employees, as it supports them to deal with challenging situations and relieves them from their frustration.

In conclusion, empty labour as distancing oneself from work does not seem to be perceived as “empty” by the office employees working in the banking industry. This is due to the fact that it provides them with time to reflect, regain energy, generate new ideas, and to deal with challenging situations.

4.2.3 Sub-Conclusion

When one thinks about empty labour, “it does really sound negative. But when you look at ways that it can be used, it actually contributes to the organisation as well, in some cases, because after all, we are all humans, we need some breaks, we cannot just work like machines”. Based on our interviews, we found that empty labour seems to mainly contribute to the organisation by facilitating social interactions and by providing the possibility for distance from work. However, we acknowledge that there are nuances in the “emptiness” of empty labour and that the experience of the degree of this “emptiness” depends on the individual. We got this impression from statements like the following: “it just depends on what people do during empty labour. Because you can always just stare throughout the window and then it doesn’t really contribute in any sense. But if you talk to your colleagues and get to know them better, I think it does”. While for this employee, staring out of the window seems to be more “empty”, for another employee this might be the most valuable way of distancing him- or herself from work. On the other side, talking to colleagues is not perceived as “empty” by the interviewee. However, another office employee explains that “[she] can get annoyed when [her colleagues are] talking nonsense and [they] need to discuss something important”. Nevertheless, the interviewed office employees in the banking industry generally do not appear to experience empty labour as entirely “empty”. This is expressed clearly in the following statement: “there is not that much empty labour ..., not empty, totally meaningless labour”. We, therefore, question the “emptiness” in the label empty labour, because there seems to be more meaning in the phenomenon than the expression leads to believe.

5 Discussion

As mentioned in the problem statement, the interest in the field of empty labour increased progressively during the last years, as a result of considerable media attention and the introduction of the term empty labour by Roland Paulsen. Considering the negative connotation of the phenomenon and its prevalent explanations, we aim to contribute to the literature by introducing organisational factors as a cause of empty labour. Moreover, our goal with this study is to question the “emptiness” of the term by identifying positive aspects of it. In the following, we will compare the empirical findings we gained through our 19 interviews in the banking industry with the existing literature. In our discussion, we will separately elaborate on these two aims and expand our findings by adding aspects of the meaningfulness and stress literature.

5.1 The Roads to Emptiness

Different roads are leading to “emptiness” at the workplace, meaning that a variety of factors influences the amount of empty labour employees engage in. While the literature mainly names employees’ laziness, boredom, and resistance as common explanations for the phenomenon, the study at hand takes organisational factors into consideration. Figure 1 gives an overview of the different explanations and the focus of the study. The consideration of organisational factors adds a new perspective on empty labour, as it reduces the responsibility for the phenomenon on the side of the employees and incorporates the organisations’ influence. In the following, we will commence by reviewing the main existing literature, followed by a summary of our main empirical findings. Subsequently, we will discuss the similarities and differences as well as how our study contributes to the fields of empty labour and organisational behaviour.

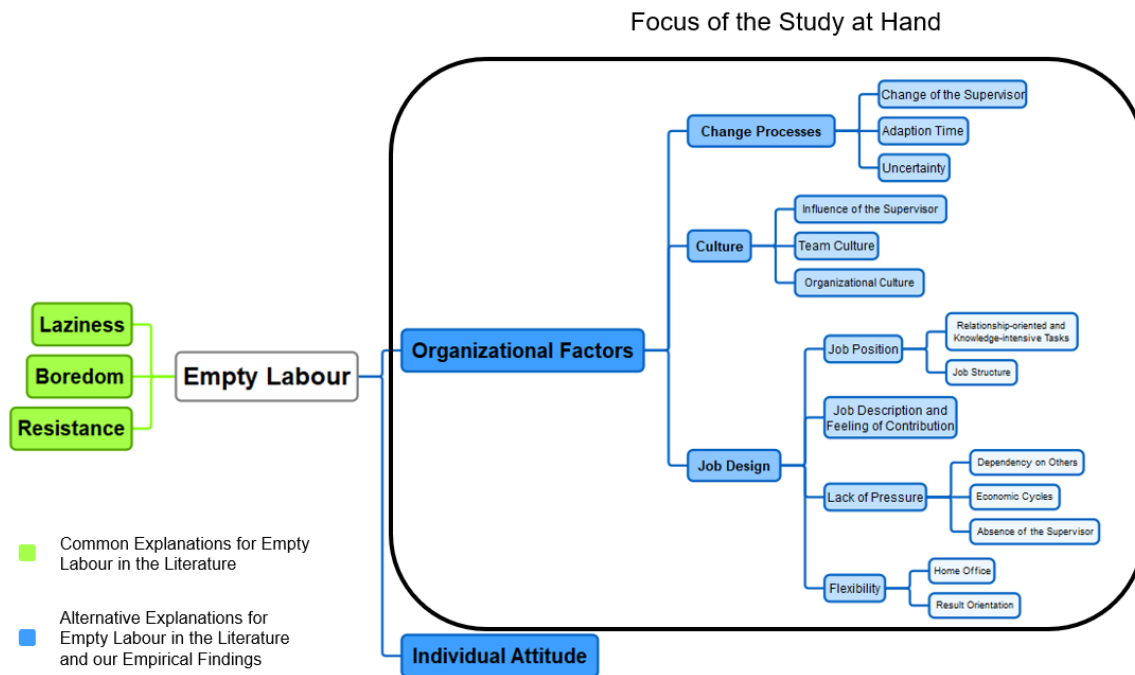


Figure 1: Overview of the Explanations for Empty Labour in the Literature and our Empirical Findings (Source: Personal Collection)

5.1.1 Highway to Obvious Explanations

The fastest and easiest explanations for empty labour that come to one's mind are probably employees' laziness, boredom, and resistance. These are also the aspects prevalent in the literature about the phenomenon, which is already indicated by its more negative labels like *time waste* and *deviant behaviour*. Taking the highway, the literature elaborated on these explanations for empty labour in more detail, while only briefly crossing the roads with alternative explanations like individual and organisational factors. Due to the limited scope of this study, we could merely choose one side road to explore. Thus, we decided on a study of organisational factors since research on the individual attitude requires trust-building and close relationships with the interviewees. As these requirements are unaccomplishable within two months, we aim to contribute to the existing literature by providing deeper insights into the organisational factors influencing empty labour. However, we acknowledge that factors like the employees' laziness, boredom, resistance, and individual attitude can, in fact, have a considerable impact on the phenomenon and that the highway has its right to exist.

To review the somewhat limited literature on organisational factors, we will provide a summary of the main findings. The literature merely mentions organisational culture explicitly as an organisational factor influencing empty labour. Aiming to include additional aspects of this research, we categorised them under the term job design. Regarding the organisational culture, it is argued that the general acceptance of behaviours like taking breaks and *cyberloafing* influences the amount to which employees engage in them. Additionally, the culture shaped by the supervisor was found to have an impact on empty labour. Concerning the job design, we categorised the influences of job positions, job descriptions in connection with a feeling of contribution, lack of pressure, and flexibility under it. The literature argues that job positions requiring creative output and positions having neither predefined schedules nor measurable results tend to involve more empty labour. Moreover, employees who do not have a clear job description and who cannot see their contribution to the team or the organisation are identified to engage in empty labour more likely. Besides these aspects, the literature indicates that the lack of time pressure, the dependency on others, and the absence of the supervisor influence empty labour. Lastly, the flexibility arising as a result of technological development is argued to provide space for employees to engage in empty labour in order to balance their working and private lives. From this summary, it becomes clear that even though literature aside the highway exists, it mentions organisational factors as a cause of empty labour rather superficially.

5.1.2 On the Side Road of Organisational Factors

Adding to the hasty explanations of the highway and, therefore, to the existing literature, we explored the side road of organisational factors. In the following, we will, thus, present our main empirical findings gained from 19 interviews with office employees of the Swedish banking industry. The side road the interviewees led us to has three different road sections, representing the three main organisational factors we identified as having an impact on empty labour. More specifically, we were led to a winding road section, illustrating the organisational change, a pebble stone section, reflecting organisational culture, and a cobble stone section, standing for the organisational factor of job design. We will elaborate on each of these sections in the following paragraphs.

5.1.2.1 The Winding Road Section

To begin with, our interviewees led us to a winding road section on our way to explore empty labour. This section represents organisational change as one influential factor of the phenomenon, because of its unpredictability and its constant challenges requiring continuous adaptation. For instance, our office employees explained that they tend to increasingly engage in empty labour when they experience a change in their supervisor. Moreover, organisational change seems to influence the amount of empty labour they engage in because they need additional time to adapt and to get used to new processes. Lastly, connected to the unpredictability of the winding road, our interviews indicate that employees are more likely to show this behaviour during change processes, as they encounter high degrees of uncertainty along the way. As the interviewees depicted organisational change as an omnipresent part of their working life, it is reasonable to assume that empty labour is a highly prevalent phenomenon in today's working environments.

5.1.2.2 The Pebble Stone Road Section

Besides the influence of organisational change processes, we identified culture as having an impact on empty labour. This relation can be illustrated by a pebble stone road section, as the organisational culture cannot only be described as a single unity but also as a combination of different sub-cultures influenced by the supervisor or the team. Moreover, the structure of the pebble stone road reflects the intangibility and the dynamics of culture. The mentioned sub-cultures, represented by the individual pebble stones, were identified as having an impact on the amount of empty labour by our interviewees. The acceptance and partially even the encouragement of this behaviour by the supervisor or the team supported the occurrence of the phenomenon. Additionally, the whole road, formed by the individual pebble stones, represents the overall organisational culture and was shown to be of high relevance. Based on our interviews, the general approval and support of empty labour in the overall culture influences the behaviour of office employees working in the banking industry.

5.1.2.3 The Cobble Stone Road Section

Finally, our interviewees led us to a cobble stone road section on our way to explore the organisational factors influencing empty labour. The cobble stones are suitable to represent the different elements falling into the category of job design, as they are

mostly independent of each other, but together form the “job design” road as a whole. Moreover, the elements of the job design are often set in stone and rather static – as are the individual cobble stones. To summarise our findings, the interviewees described relationship-oriented and knowledge-intensive tasks as contributing to the amount of empty labour they engage in. Additionally, they added that job positions with a predefined schedule and measurable results make the phenomenon less likely. Based on our interviews, we further got the impression that an overly strict or unclear job description increases the probability of empty labour. This is connected to the need of employees to see how their work contributes to the team or the bank as a whole. Furthermore, the interviews indicate that a lack of pressure positively influences the amount of empty labour, whereby this lack of pressure seems to arise as a result of economic cycles, dependency on others, and the absence of the supervisor. Lastly, we identified flexibility as having an impact on the amount of empty labour office employees in the banking industry engage in. This is the case, because flexible working hours, the opportunity to work from home, and the measurement of performance based on results seem to provide employees with the possibility to perform non-work related tasks. Therefore, based on the interviews, it is reasonable to assume that the elements falling into the category of job design influence the amount of empty labour.

5.1.3 Exploring the Side Road: Comparison between the Existing Literature and our Empirical Findings

In the process of exploring the side road, we compared our empirical findings regarding organisational factors influencing empty labour to the existing literature and found that some factors named by our interviewees contradict, whereas others support the literature. After introducing these factors, we will further identify the factors extending the literature.

Regarding the contradictory factors, we found two aspects that are not aligned with the existing literature. Firstly, our empirical findings are not in accordance with Fritz, Lam and Spreitzer (2011), who found that employees are less likely to take time for recovery when facing uncertainty. Instead, our interviewees’ responses make it reasonable to assume that the amount of empty labour increases in times of uncertainty. Referring back to the uncertainty related to organisational changes, many interviewees stated

that the need to talk to colleagues about their feelings increased. As these conversations are not directly work-related, but mainly focused on emotional perceptions, it can be argued that the office employees in the banking industry tend to engage in more empty labour due to uncertainty. Once again, our findings, in this case, are in contrast to the existing literature. Secondly, Green (2004) states that technological development enables higher managerial control and, therefore, increases the employees' effort. This contradicts our impression that ICT provides employees with space to engage in empty labour, which subsequently indicates that their efforts might even decrease. Opposed to these contradictions, the remaining factors touched upon in the existing literature and summarised above were all supported by our empirical findings.

Apart from supporting the existing factors of the literature through our findings, we mainly contributed by expanding the existing data by additional organisational factors. Furthermore, we categorised the existing literature and our empirical findings, giving the research about organisational factors influencing empty labour a profound structure for future studies. Regarding the additional factors, to our knowledge, organisational change processes have so far not been mentioned in the existing literature as a factor influencing the amount of empty labour. However, as summarised above, our interviews clearly indicate that empty labour is especially prevalent during times of organisational change. The fact that we initially did not ask about this factor, but that the interviewees independently mentioned it as the main contributor, suggests that the office employees working in the banking industry perceive organisational change as a factor of high relevance for their empty labour behaviour.

Another area to which we add is organisational culture. Even though the organisational culture has already been mentioned in the literature as an organisational factor influencing empty labour, we contribute by elaborating on the relation in more detail and especially by finding a relation between the team culture and the phenomenon. Based on our interviews, it is reasonable to assume that the team culture influences the amount of empty labour office employees working in the banking industry engage in. This is, amongst others, indicated by the football table example mentioned by the IT developer, where the daily football table match was an inherent part of a working

day in his team. This example illustrates that his empty labour behaviour increased as a result of the general acceptance of this behaviour in his team.

Lastly, we contribute by having assigned smaller aspects of our empirical findings to the term job design and by significantly expanding the literature in this area. Regarding the assigned aspect of job position, we add to the literature by elaborating on the relevance of relationship-oriented and knowledge-intensive tasks. According to our interviewees, they need to engage in empty labour in order to build relationships important for their position and to complete their knowledge-intensive tasks, that often require creative approaches. Moreover, we add a new perspective to the literature by providing empirical findings indicating that empty labour also increases as a result of an overly strict job description. Concluding from the responses of our interviewees, we further contribute by explaining the influence of time pressure mentioned in the literature through the impact of economic cycles. Additionally, we provide further empirical findings in connection with the influences of ICT. Based on our interviews, we got the impression that flexible time, the opportunity for home office, and the orientation on results provide the possibility for employees working in the banking industry to engage in empty labour. The last paragraphs clearly show our significant contribution to the literature, in the sense that we present entirely new organisational factors important to consider for the phenomenon of empty labour.

5.1.4 The Relevance of the Side Road

The variety of organisational factors, found while exploring the side road, has shown that not only the individuals have a responsibility with regards to empty labour, but also the organisations and that they should be aware of the consequences of these factors for their employees. In the following, we will discuss the growing importance of the organisational factors influencing empty labour, a possible challenge for the organisation, and their impact on the employees' behaviour.

The significance of organisations' awareness of their influence becomes particularly relevant, as the organisational factors seem to be increasingly important due to *work intensification* and *work extension*. As mentioned in the literature review, Korunka et al. (2015) state that today's employees need to adapt more to organisational change. As explained in the paragraphs above, our interviewees independently mentioned the

importance of organisational change, indicating that it is a highly prevalent part of their daily working lives. Additionally, Alvesson (2004) argues in his book about KIFs that knowledge-intensive work becomes increasingly important, also including the higher relevance of professional relationships. This is supported by the statement of one of our interviewees that today's working environments are mainly about relationships. Moreover, connected to the blurring lines between working and private lives (Paulsen, 2014), the literature review already gave an overview of the increasing flexibility of employees through ICT (Fritz, Lam & Spreitzer, 2011; Green, 2004). One interviewee commented on these increasingly blurred lines by questioning the ability to differentiate between empty labour and work. This illustrates that the organisational factors we found in our interviews become more relevant and that, as a result of this, the organisations' responsibility for empty labour becomes increasingly important.

Due to the apparently higher importance of change, knowledge-intensive and relationship-oriented tasks, as well as flexibility in today's working environments, we assume that it becomes increasingly difficult for organisations to capture the constantly changing tasks in clear job descriptions. Furthermore, as illustrated by the literature as well as by our empirical findings, there exists a relation between the job description and the employees' feeling of contribution. Therefore, we suggest that the challenge to formulate a clear job description makes it more difficult for employees to see their contribution to the company's success. This indicates challenges for future working environments, as the unclear job description and the ambiguous relation between employees' work and the company's success make it more difficult to fulfil their growing demand to find meaning at the workplace – an aspect increasingly relevant especially for the Generation Y (Hardering, 2015). The last two paragraphs suggest that the organisational factors having an impact on empty labour become progressively more critical nowadays, which ultimately means that the phenomenon is more prevalent in today's working environments and that it is more relevant for organisations to acknowledge their responsibility for this phenomenon.

Our empirical findings focusing on the organisational factors influencing empty labour already provided insights into how these factors have an impact on the employees' emotional state. Therefore, we will elaborate on this influence in the following. It is reasonable to assume that empty labour, induced by organisational factors, can also

evoke emotional challenges for the employees. For instance, one office employee working in the Swedish banking industry describes not attending Fika as making a negative impression on the management. This indicates that culture enabling empty labour might put social pressure on the employees to participate in it. Therefore, we argue that it is important for organisations to be aware of their influence on the employees' behaviour. Opposed to this, our findings also indicate some positive aspects of empty labour due to organisational factors. To exemplify, one interviewee described that, through empty labour in the form of talking to colleagues, he could deal with stress and frustration connected to uncertainty in change processes. We, therefore, assume that empty labour can support employees in coping with stress experienced during change processes. All things considered, the findings caused us to question if empty labour is really as "empty" as the label leads us to believe. We will elaborate on this question in more detail in the second part of the discussion.

5.1.5 Sub-Conclusion

By exploring the side road, we added organisational factors as an alternative explanation to the hasty ones of the highway. Besides uncertainty and technological development, argued to reduce the amount of empty labour by the literature, all the other factors prevalent in the literature were supported by our findings. Moreover, we especially expanded the existing knowledge about organisational factors influencing empty labour by adding the aspect of organisational change and factors falling into the category of job design. After comparing the existing literature to our empirical findings, we discussed the importance of organisations' awareness of their impact on the employees' empty labour behaviour. This is particularly relevant, as the organisational factors seem to become increasingly important in today's working environments and as the employees are increasingly striving to find meaning at the workplace. The findings of the organisational factors reduce the responsibility on the side of the individual employees and add further explanations to the hasty justifications of laziness, boredom, and resistance. We concluded the discussion of our first research question by reviewing several statements indicating a varied experience of empty labour. This indication led us to formulate our second research question, which we will elaborate on in the following.

5.2 Are We on the Right Track?

While the highway had many signs pointing to the destination of “emptiness”, exploring the side road led us to question the “emptiness” as our destination. Based on our empirical findings, we got the impression that empty labour is experienced as less “empty” by the office employees working in the banking industry than indicated by the label of “emptiness”. In the following, we will, firstly, recall the existing literature and our empirical findings questioning the “emptiness”. Secondly, we will compare both parts and discuss the relevance of the studied aspects.

5.2.1 Positive Aspects of Empty Labour in the Literature

Even though the phenomenon of empty labour has a rather negative connotation in the existing literature, a small number of authors, like Eddy, D'Abate and Thurston (2010), argues that there are positive aspects to it as well. For instance, the literature found that empty labour can be considered as beneficial, as it creates space to build and improve relationships at work. This is argued to contribute to employees' performance, satisfaction, emotional and physical energy, as well as to their ability to deal with stress. Additionally, researchers found that empty labour provides employees with opportunities to take mental breaks and to distance themselves from work. This is also found to contribute to employees' performance, productivity, well-being, and, once again, to their ability to cope with stress. Moreover, increased creativity and the ability to balance working and private lives were identified as two further positive aspects of empty labour. Summing it up, the literature slightly touches upon improved work relationships, opportunities for mental breaks, facilitation of creativity as well as a balance between working and private lives as positive aspects of empty labour. Metaphorically speaking, these positive aspects indicate that we might have been on the wrong track regarding the destination of “emptiness”.

5.2.2 Empirical Findings on Employees' Experience of Empty Labour

Based on our 19 conducted interviews in the banking industry, we got the impression that the experience and the evaluation of empty labour depend on the individual's needs. Nevertheless, we found strong indications for some recurring, positive aspects of empty labour. One of these aspects is the contribution of empty labour in the form of social interaction on the employees' well-being and motivation. Furthermore, it

seems to support the functioning of the organisation, in the sense that empty labour in the form of social interaction improves the team and inter-departmental collaboration, the delivery of results, and the relations to customers. Moreover, based on our interviewees' responses, it is reasonable to assume that empty labour has positive aspects, as it provides the employees with possibilities to distance themselves from work. These possibilities of distance seem to enable employees to reflect, regain energy, generate new ideas, and to deal with challenging situations. In conclusion, this demonstrates that our interviewed office employees experience empty labour as less "empty" than suggested by the label, as it allows employees to engage in social interaction and to distance themselves from work.

5.2.3 Comparison Between Existing Literature and Empirical Findings

Comparing the existing literature to our empirical findings, we did not find any contradictory aspects. However, there are some findings in the literature that we could not confirm in our interviews, namely taking naps in stressful times and gaining comfort by contacting family and friends at the workplace. Furthermore, the scope of our research restricted us from studying the link between the positive aspects of empty labour and the quantifiable outcomes of employees' performance and productivity. Our empirical findings do suggest that there exists a relation between empty labour and employees' performance and productivity, but it would require additional research to support these indications. We, therefore, contribute by supporting and expanding the benefits the literature introduced and by taking a more critical perspective on it. In the following, we will discuss in what specific way we contribute to research in the field of empty labour.

5.2.3.1 *Supporting the Literature*

To begin with, we contribute by supporting the aspects already suggested by the existing literature. More specifically, our empirical findings are in line with D'Abate's (2005) argument that empty labour in the form of social interaction contributes to trust- and team-building. For instance, this is illustrated by the Cash Management Specialist, who needed to become a buddy with his colleagues and invested considerable amounts of time in order to build a trustworthy relationship and to enable effective collaboration. Additionally, the interviews we conducted give the impression that empty labour in the form of social interaction contributes to the employees' well-being, which

is also argued by Eddy, D'Abate and Thurston (2010). This is exemplified by an interviewee's statement that calling a colleague supported an office employee in dealing with the ignorance she was facing in a meeting. Moreover, Liberman et al. (2011) found that empty labour in the form of social interaction enables employees to gather valuable information informally. Most of our interviewees regard empty labour, especially in the form of getting a coffee, as valuable for informally exchanging information as well. Lastly, our findings support that empty labour in the form of social interaction is a coping strategy, as defined by Dewe and Guest (1990), because our interviews have shown that the employees feel safer through relationships at work.

Furthermore, we support the literature through our findings that empty labour is beneficial, as it provides employees with the possibility to distance themselves from their work. Concerning this form of empty labour, we found that our interviewees used the time to regain new energy, which is in line with Paulsen's (2014) findings. For instance, the Contract and Vendor Performance Manager illustrates the need for empty labour to regain energy by mentioning that she spent 45 minutes of her working time in a massage chair after a stressful day. Moreover, the literature argues that empty labour as distancing oneself from work is beneficial, as it provides employees with the ability to deal with stress (Greengard, 2000). Empty labour in the form of distance from work can, therefore, be considered as a coping strategy as defined by Dewe and Guest (1990). This is, for example, supported by the observation of one interviewee that, especially in stressful situations, he needs to take a break to regain energy. Additionally, the literature found that taking regular breaks increases employees' overall well-being (Sonnetag, 2003). One of the office employees working in the banking industry explains that after having spent some intense time in Copenhagen, he feels better in his current position because it offers more room for empty labour. As one last aspect, some of our interviewees explained that they need to take breaks in order to solve problems and generate new ideas. This supports the literature's finding that empty labour enables employees' creativity (Vitak, Crouse & LaRose, 2011; Oravec, 2002). Our empirical findings are, therefore, in line with the literature in the sense that empty labour in the form of social interaction and in the form of distance from work benefits the individual as well as the organisation. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that the phenomenon is experienced as less "empty" by the employees than the literature implies.

5.2.3.2 *Expanding the Literature*

Apart from supporting existing benefits in the literature, we contribute by expanding the prevalent knowledge on the positive aspects of empty labour by additional ones. Counting into the category of empty labour in the form of social interaction, we found that improved relationships at work seem to enhance the banking employees' motivation. For instance, one interviewee explained that going to Fika supports him to perform at his job because it encourages him and generates enthusiasm. Furthermore, our empirical findings suggest that empty labour not only improves the collaboration within teams but also between departments. This is supported by an interviewee's statement that by talking to colleagues from other departments at the coffee machine, he gains information valuable for his own tasks. Combining the improved collaborations within teams and between departments, we got the impression that our employees are enabled to come to faster results through empty labour in the form of social interaction. Moreover, empty labour seems to be beneficial not only internally, but also externally, as it provides office employees with the possibility to invest in their relationships with customers. Regarding the benefit of empty labour as distancing oneself from work, we got the impression that office employees working in the banking industry use the time to reflect. Moreover, this type of empty labour seems to enable employees to deal with challenging situations. For instance, one office employee sometimes copes with unsuccessful deals by leaving the office in the middle of the day. Therefore, from our additional insights, we conclude that office employees in the banking industry experience empty labour as less "empty" than indicated by the literature.

5.2.4 Discussing the Emptiness of Empty Labour

While exploring the side road, we found indications that we might not be on the right track regarding the destination of "emptiness". As can be seen from the paragraphs above, empty labour is experienced as less "empty" by the interviewed office employees working in the banking industry than presented by the majority of the literature. In the following, we will, therefore, discuss the concept of empty labour by questioning the "emptiness" included in the label, which can be considered as our most significant contribution to the research on the phenomenon. We will argue that the meaningfulness of empty labour on the spheres of the ego and a specific group make it impossible by nature for the phenomenon to be entirely "empty". Subsequently, we

will discuss the relevance of the question by highlighting the importance of the organisation's awareness of empty labour and by questioning the applicability of the concept in today's working environments.

5.2.4.1 Meaningfulness of Empty Labour

By talking to our interview partner, we got the impression that they experience empty labour, especially in the form of social interactions and possibilities to distance themselves from work, as less "empty" than suggested by the literature and, instead, as meaningful. As already introduced in the literature review, Alvesson, Gabriel, and Paulsen (2017) define three spheres of meaningfulness, namely meaningfulness to the ego, to a specific group, and to the wider society. In our interviews, we found that empty labour seems to be meaningful to the ego and to a specific group. The specific group, in our case, can describe the organisational team, the department, or the organisation as a whole. Based on the responses of our interviewees, we could not identify the meaningfulness of empty labour to society. However, we do not claim that it does not exist, but rather that it seems to be difficult for our interview partner to estimate it. In the following, we will commence by introducing our empirical findings supporting our impression of the meaningfulness of empty labour to the ego. Subsequently, we will present the findings indicating the meaningfulness of the phenomenon to a specific group.

Based on our 19 conducted interviews, it is reasonable to assume that empty labour can be meaningful to the individual employee. According to Hardering (2015), employees' feeling of belongingness is important for their perception of meaningfulness at work. Our interviews indicate that empty labour can contribute to this feeling in the sense of social interaction. More specifically, one of our interviewees explained that having a social context at work is essential for employees to be happy and to keep a healthy work-life balance. Furthermore, another office employee emphasised that having Fika and chatting with his colleagues is important, as it is pleasant to have friendships at work. This indicates that he strives for a feeling of belongingness at the workplace. Besides this aspect, our empirical findings, categorised under the sections motivation, reflection, generating of new ideas, and dealing with challenging situations, further support the impression that empty labour is

meaningful for the individual. We, therefore, concluded that the phenomenon is perceived as less “empty” than indicated by the majority of the literature.

The meanings of empty labour to the individual mentioned so far might become even more important due to the changing working conditions we introduced in the literature review. Based on our interviews, we assume that the phenomenon might be a reaction or a “solution” of employees to the increased challenges connected to the changing working conditions. Especially empty labour in the sense of providing employees with the opportunity to regain energy might become relevant as a result of *work intensification* and *work extension*, because it provides them with opportunities to cope with stress. We drew this connection, as Dewe and Guest (1990) define three of their coping strategies, namely *emotional release*, *recovery and preparation*, and *postpone action*, in a way that indicates that these strategies are actually a form of empty labour. The strategy of *emotional release* was already suggested by our empirical findings focusing on the first research question, as one interviewee explained that, especially during change processes, talking to colleagues relieves the related perception of stress and frustration. This is further supported by the example mentioned above, in which an office employee called her colleague to talk about the ignorance she was facing in a meeting and that it helped her to reduce her feeling of stress. Moreover, the coping strategy of *recovery and preparation* is illustrated by our interviewees, as they described their need to go to the coffee machine or for a walk when they are facing a complicated problem or a complex task. Additionally, we got the impression that our employees engage in empty labour in the sense of the coping strategy of *postponing action*. Coming back to the example of the Contract and Vendor Performance Manager, we assume that empty labour helped her to cope with a stressful situation in the sense of postponing a challenging situation. We got this impression through her statement that after the usage of the massage chair, she was enabled to understand her customers’ position and to deal with them more calmly. This paragraph showed that empty labour can be considered as meaningful to individuals, as it helps them to cope with stress. However, as described in the empirical findings section, we also found in our interviews that the degree of meaningfulness of empty labour depends on the individual employee. This is in line with Rothlin and Werder (2008), who argue that meaningfulness, in general, depends on the person.

Besides the meaningfulness of empty labour to the individual employee, we got the impression that the phenomenon might be meaningful to the team, the department, and the organisation as well. This is especially the case in the sense of empty labour as social interaction, because, according to Veltman (2016), relationships can be considered as one key dimension of meaningful work. Regarding the meaningfulness to the team, our interviewees mentioned the importance of empty labour in trust- and team-building. For instance, the Business Controller's example of the relevance of sharing private incidents, like the sickness of a relative, shows that empty labour can contribute to a common understanding within the team. Additionally, empty labour in the form of social interaction is meaningful on the departmental level. This is exemplified in the observation of one interviewee that during coffee breaks, she also socialises with members of other departments, which contributes to the exchange of information. Moving on to the broader perspective of the organisation, empty labour seems to be meaningful, as it increases the collaboration and understanding of different sub-cultures – contributing to a more unified organisational culture. This is illustrated by one interviewee who described that through conversations at the coffee machine, he gets the opportunity to talk to colleagues who are usually spread across the organisation. Considering these examples, it is reasonable to assume that empty labour is not only meaningful to the individual, but also to the team, the department, and the organisation.

The previous paragraphs show that empty labour, especially in the form of social interaction and distance from work, is experienced as less “empty” than indicated by the literature and is perceived as meaningful on the sphere of the ego as well as of the group. Our office employees, working in the banking industry, experience empty labour as meaningful, since it contributes to their feeling of belongingness, their motivation, opportunities for reflection, the generation of new ideas and the handling of challenging situations. Empty labour is meaningful to the team, as it creates a shared understanding between its members. Furthermore, it is meaningful for the inter-departmental collaboration in the sense that employees can exchange information and for the organisation, as it unifies the different sub-cultures and enables valuable relations. Based on these empirical findings, we argue that empty labour cannot be as “empty” as suggested by the literature and as indicated by the label of Roland Paulsen.

This is due to the fact that our office employees see meaning in the phenomenon and that, to our understanding, meaningfulness makes “emptiness” impossible by nature.

5.2.4.2 *Relevance of Questioning the Emptiness*

As mentioned in the literature review, the majority of the existing literature tends to place the responsibility of empty labour on the employees – presenting it as a result of their laziness, boredom or resistance. These explanations of empty labour cause organisations to attempt to reduce these supposedly deviant behaviours (Lim, 2002). As opposed to this, our empirical findings make it essential for organisations to not only acknowledge their responsibility for the phenomenon but to also be aware of the benefits and the meaning of it. When doing so, it is of high relevance to consider the individual needs and perspectives with regards to empty labour. As mentioned in the paragraph about the relevance of the side road, employees might perceive social pressure to engage in the phenomenon supported by an influential team culture. This is further illustrated by the example of one office employee, who feels annoyed by the “empty” conversations of her colleagues she is unwillingly exposed to. Organisations, therefore, need to acknowledge that every employee seems to have different needs with regards to empty labour and that it is crucial to take these into consideration.

Our empirical findings not only led us to question the label of “emptiness” but also whether the concept of empty labour as a whole still fits today’s working environments. We came to this line of thoughts because empty labour seems to have many positive aspects, making it a highly natural phenomenon in the workplace. This impression is, amongst others, supported by an interviewee who considers empty labour as a natural part of human nature. Through the positive aspects of empty labour and the employees’ perceived meaning in it, the phenomenon will automatically be further integrated into the workplaces. Moreover, the tendency of this integration is further promoted through changing working conditions, involving an increased feeling of stress through *work intensification* and *work extension*, which makes empty labour a reaction or “solution” of employees to the new conditions. For instance, the relationship-oriented tasks of our interviewees show that empty labour seems to be part of the work task, as private conversations are a necessity for building relations. Furthermore, the banks in our interviews already focus on results when it comes to performance measurements of their employees. These empirical findings indicate that the results the office

employees deliver can be considered as more important than the time they spend in the office. We assume that this will become increasingly important, which leads us to question the applicability of the concept of empty labour in modern working environments. Therefore, we raise awareness to the fact that one should not attempt to blindly force a concept, having had its right to exist in the past, onto an incommensurable future.

5.2.5 Sub-Conclusion

Our empirical findings generally suggest that office employees working in the banking industry experience empty labour as less “empty” than implied by the literature and the label of the phenomenon, as they perceive meaning in it. Even though the existing literature in the field of empty labour briefly touches upon some positive aspects of empty labour, we contribute by supporting the finding that empty labour as social interaction enhances trust- and team-building, collaboration, and employees’ well-being. Furthermore, we also found that empty labour provides the possibility for employees to distance themselves from work, contributing to their abilities to regain energy, cope with stress, solve problems, and generate new ideas. Besides supporting the existing literature, we expanded it by mainly adding that improved relationships enhance motivation and inter-departmental collaboration. Moreover, we found that empty labour provides possibilities for the employees to reflect and to deal with challenging situations. While discussing the “emptiness”, we concluded that our interviewees perceive empty labour as meaningful to the individual as well as to the team, the department, and the organisation. Questioning the “emptiness” is of high relevance because organisations need to acknowledge not only their influence on the behaviour but also the possible benefits of it and its dependency on the individual’s perception. Moreover, the benefits of the phenomenon and its natural experience by our office employees led us to question the applicability of the concept of empty labour in today’s working environments.

5.3 Reviewing the Journey

Exploring the roads to “emptiness”, we not only drove down the highway, representing the prevalent causes of empty labour mentioned in the literature but also the side road, providing us with additional explanations for empty labour in the form of organisational factors. While driving these roads, we started to notice signs causing us to ask

ourselves whether we are on the right track regarding the destination of “emptiness”. Answering our second research question, we found that office employees working in the banking industry do not experience empty labour as “empty” as indicated by the majority of the literature and its label. We, therefore, concluded that the roads to “emptiness” do not lead us to “emptiness”, but rather to meaningfulness. Considering the growing longing for meaningfulness and the integration of private time into the workplace, we argue that the general applicability of the concept in modern working environments should be questioned. However, considering the recent development in Europe, it is necessary to await the consequences of the Court of Justice of the European Union’s decision of May 2019. The decision to legally bind European employers to strictly measure their employees’ working hours (Court of Justice of the European Union, 2019) could influence the empty labour behaviour of European employees and could make the concept more applicable to today’s working environments again.

6 Conclusion

While exploring the roads to “emptiness”, navigated by the 19 interviews we conducted with office employees working in the Swedish banking industry, we reached interesting conclusions. In the following, we will provide an overview of the main findings to our research questions. Regarding the first question, namely how organisational factors influence the amount of empty labour, we found that organisational change processes, organisational culture, and job design influence the amount of empty labour. Organisational change processes seem to have an impact on the phenomenon in the sense of the employees’ need to discuss changes of the supervisor, their increased adaption time, and their uncertainty. Moreover, regarding the influence of organisational culture, we not only found that the general culture has an impact on empty labour, but also the sub-cultures developed with the influence of supervisors and teams. Lastly, our interviews indicated that the job design in the sense of the job position, the job description in connection with the employees’ feeling of contribution, the lack of pressure, and the flexibility are of high relevance for the empty labour behaviour of our interviewees. Regarding our second research question, namely to what extent our employees experience empty labour as “empty”, we found that they perceive the phenomenon as meaningful and, therefore, as less “empty” than indicated by the literature. The more detailed findings to our research questions will be presented in the next paragraphs. Followed by the theoretical contribution, we will further introduce the limitations of our study. We will conclude by giving an outline for practical implications and future research.

6.1 Main Findings

Comparing the limited existing literature on the organisational factors influencing empty labour and on the benefits of the phenomenon with our empirical findings, we found that most of the findings touched upon in the literature could be supported by our research. However, we contribute mainly by expanding the existing literature and by adding a critical perspective to it. In the following, we will summarise the main findings separated according to our two research questions.

6.1.1 Organisational Factors Influencing Empty Labour

Based on our interviews, we found that the organisational factors briefly introduced by the existing literature are in line with our empirical findings. Organisational culture, especially with regards to the supervisor's influence, seems to influence the amount of empty labour employees engage in. Additionally, our findings support the impact of creative tasks, predefined schedules and measurable results, clear job descriptions in connection with employees' feeling of contribution, lack of pressure, and flexibility on empty labour.

Our main contribution concerning the first research question, however, is that we expanded the organisational factors already prevalent in the literature by additional ones. Our main empirical finding is the significant impact of organisational change on employees' empty labour behaviour. Besides this factor, we concluded that the team culture, relationship-oriented and knowledge-intensive tasks, overly strict job descriptions, and economic cycles influence the amount of empty labour employees working in the banking industry engage in. Additionally, flexible time, the opportunity to work from home and the orientation on results provide them with the possibility to behave this way and can, therefore, be considered as additional factors influencing the phenomenon.

Adding a more critical perspective to the impact of these organisational factors on employees' empty labour behaviour, we argued that the phenomenon might have rather negative consequences for them, for instance perceptions of social pressure. However, the empirical findings focusing on the first research questions also already indicated benefits of the phenomenon, leading us to question the "emptiness" of it.

6.1.2 Questioning the Emptiness of the Phenomenon

Throughout the process of conducting interviews focused on understanding the organisational factors influencing empty labour, we got the impression that our employees experience the phenomenon as less "empty" than implied by the majority of the literature and Roland Paulsen's label. Responding to this impression, we expanded our research in this direction and found that the benefits slightly touched upon in the literature could be mostly supported by our empirical findings. Our interviews indicated that empty labour, especially in the form of social interaction, can

contribute to trust- and team-building, employees' well-being, the exchange of information, and the coping with stress, which is in line with the literature. Moreover, our interviews support the findings of the literature that empty labour provides the opportunity for employees to distance themselves from work, which creates space to regain energy, deal with stress, increase well-being, and generate new ideas.

However, we do not only support the existing literature on the beneficial aspects of empty labour, but also expand it. Our interviews indicated that empty labour as social interaction enhances employees' motivation and collaborations between departments. Moreover, and combining those two positive aspects, we found that empty labour increases the pace of delivering results. Additionally, it seems to improve external relationships, as it provides opportunities to invest time in customers. Based on our interviews, we got the impression that empty labour in the form of distancing oneself from work supports the employees in the banking industry by creating space to reflect and to deal with challenging situations.

The considerable number of positive aspects of empty labour, mentioned by the literature and our interviewees, led us to conclude that the phenomenon is not as "empty" as implied and that, metaphorically speaking, we were on the wrong track before. This is further supported by our established link to the literature on meaningfulness. Arguing that empty labour is meaningful not merely to the individual, but also to the team, the department, and the organisation, supported our impression that empty labour is not perceived as entirely "empty". Moreover, we add a rather critical perspective to the literature, as we concluded that the perception of empty labour depends on the individual. One employee might experience staring out the window as meaningless, whereas another one might appreciate it as the most valuable form of recreation. Empty labour can, therefore, be "empty" for one individual, but meaningful for another.

6.2 Theoretical Contribution

Our main findings – that there are additional organisational factors influencing the amount of empty labour and that office employees working in the banking industry experience the phenomenon as less "empty" and more meaningful than indicated by the literature – thus, fill two of the three gaps identified in the literature. The gaps we

aimed to fill were already introduced in the literature review and are, firstly, the merely touched upon organisational factors having an impact on empty labour. Secondly, we reacted to the need to add a positive view on the negative connotations the phenomenon had in the majority of the literature so far. This study, therefore, contributes to the existing research in the field of organisational behaviour, more specifically, empty labour. Additionally, our research is of high significance, as it focuses on the knowledge-intensive setting, which is valuable as these environments are argued to gain further relevance in today's working environments.

Apart from naming different organisational factors influencing the empty labour behaviour of our office employees, we contribute in a broader sense as well. The existing literature mainly ascribes the responsibility for the phenomenon to the individual employee in the sense that he or she engages in empty labour as a result of boredom, laziness, and resistance. By arguing that organisational factors influence their non-work related activities during working hours, we reduce the responsibility on the side of the employees. Instead, we discussed the responsibility of the organisations, emphasising the importance of their awareness of their impact. This awareness is especially important, as many organisations blindly punish employees for non-work related activities and as the organisational factors, and consequently the empty labour, become increasingly important due to changing working environments. Therefore, we contribute to the literature by providing an alternative explanation for empty labour and adding another perspective to it.

By answering our second research question, namely to what extent office employees in the banking sector experience empty labour as "empty", we brought light to the benefits of the behaviour. We, thus, contribute to the literature about empty labour by adding a more critical perspective to the somewhat negative connotations of the phenomenon. Providing those benefits further supports our argument that organisations need to be increasingly aware of the phenomenon, as they could otherwise erase the positive aspects of it. Moreover, our study contributes to the existing literature by emphasising that the experience of empty labour depends on the individual. Organisations, therefore, not only need to be aware of their influence on the behaviour, but also of the individual consequences of it.

Taking the literature and our empirical findings of both questions into consideration led us to further question the applicability of the whole concept of empty labour. We based this critical perspective on the impression that empty labour is a highly natural phenomenon in today's working environments and that its relevance is likely to further increase as a result of the meaningfulness employees see in it as well as due to the changing working conditions. For instance, related to the higher relationship-oriented tasks and stricter result orientation, we argue that empty labour becomes increasingly integrated into today's working environments. We, therefore, contribute to the existing literature on empty labour by raising awareness to the fact that a concept, having had its right to exist in the past, should not be forced into an incommensurable future.

6.3 Limitations

Even though we conducted the research to our best knowledge, we found some limitations that need to be taken into consideration. In the following, we will introduce the limitations of our study with regards to the definition of the concept of empty labour and our methodological approach.

6.3.1 Limitations Regarding the Concept of Empty Labour

Concerning the definition of empty labour, we came across some weaknesses and ambiguities while studying it in more detail. To begin with, we acknowledge that, based on Paulsen's work, there are different possible interpretations of the "emptiness" in the term. The definition of low *potential output* suggests that the author uses "empty" in order to describe the complete absence of work tasks. However, Paulsen further describes other forms of empty labour arising despite high *potential output*. Therefore, we assume that the "emptiness" in the label does not merely include having nothing to do at work, but also that the time spent on empty labour is perceived as wasted. As we got the impression from our interviews that our employees did have high *potential output*, we focused on the latter interpretation of the "emptiness". Furthermore, as mentioned several times in the empirical findings and discussion sections, the experience of empty labour depends on the individual. While one employee might perceive staring out the window as "empty", another one might need to use it to get new ideas for his or her tasks.

Besides the ambiguity of the term “emptiness”, the differentiation between work-related and non-work related tasks is difficult to make. For instance, relationship-oriented tasks, like supporting and consulting customers, might require small-talk about non-work related issues to create a trustable atmosphere for doing business. Moreover, we questioned whether *soldiering* – the intentional reduction of work – can really be considered as empty labour. Our understanding of it is the procrastination of tasks. However, procrastinating or prolonging a task does not automatically mean that the employee engages in empty labour in Paulsen’s (2015) sense of non-work related activities at work. The employee could procrastinate one task by doing another still work-related task. Additionally, we also already touched upon the difficulty of flexible working hours, making empty labour more integrated into the work itself. As our employees can work from home, on the bus and at any time, it was difficult for them to know when their working day begins and ends. Connected to the flexibility in today’s working environments, we questioned whether leaving work early can be considered as empty labour. We understood it as a part of empty labour, as the employees leaving early engage in non-work related activities during their official working hours. However, we acknowledge that this can be interpreted in different ways.

These weaknesses and inconsistencies in the definition of empty labour constitute a limitation of our study and made us, at the same time, question the applicability of the concept in today’s working environments.

6.3.2 Methodological Limitations

Besides these limitations caused by the definition of empty labour, we acknowledge that our study involves methodological limitations as well. As we cannot speak Swedish, but conducted research in the Swedish banking industry, all the interviews had to be taken in English. This might have had an impact on the quality of our study, as neither us nor the interviewees could express themselves in their mother tongues. Especially on the side of the interviewees, this might have limited their ability to communicate their feelings and experiences with regards to empty labour. Moreover, conducting a considerable amount of 19 interviews helped us to gain a variety of insights, but at the same time also influenced the outcome of this study. Due to the scope of the paper, we were not able to include every aspect of the interview, making the selection of the findings already our interpretation. Additionally, our interviewees,

coming from different divisions and positions, did provide us with a broad understanding of the phenomenon. However, we acknowledge that their variety of backgrounds make comparisons between them questionable. Lastly, the selection of our interviewees might have influenced the study because they voluntarily decided to participate. This could indicate that they did not perceive empty labour as a negative phenomenon, because we assume that openly talking about negative experiences requires more trust to the interviewers.

6.4 Practical Implications and Future Research

By analysing the organisational factors influencing empty labour and the way the phenomenon is experienced by office employees working in the banking industry, we not only aim to expand the existing literature but also to find practical implications and starting points for future research. In the following, we will provide an overview of these practical implications of our study as well as an outline for future research.

Concerning the practical implications, we mentioned throughout the study that organisations need to become aware of their responsibility for empty labour as well as the benefits of the phenomenon for their employees, teams, departments and the organisations as a whole. This is important because of two aspects, namely the often-hasty punishment of employees and the increasing significance of empty labour in today's working environments. Our study can support organisations' understanding of the phenomenon, contributing to more detailed evaluations of intended punishment. In the majority of the cases, it might be more valuable for organisations to desist from punishment, because organisational factors lead to the empty labour behaviour of employees and because this behaviour involves positive aspects. Moreover, the increasing significance of empty labour makes it a natural phenomenon of today's working environments. Therefore, it is vital for organisations to understand it and be aware of it. More specific implications for the organisation and especially for the managers are that they should create suitable environments for empty labour. For instance, they could improve the communication process during organisational change in order to reduce the employees' need to engage in empty labour. Alternatively, they might directly communicate the benefits of empty labour and allow employees to openly engage in it as a form of social interaction or distancing themselves from work.

Besides its significance in providing practical implications, our study can be considered as valuable, because it constitutes a starting point for future research. We identified two ways in which empty labour is worth to study further, namely regarding the right amount of the behaviour and its applicability in today's workplaces. Our study indicates that empty labour includes positive aspects and that the experience of its "emptiness" depends on the individual. However, we also identified negative consequences it can have on the employees – especially in the sense of social pressure. We, therefore, call for research examining the best balance of empty labour and possibilities to adapt it to the individual. Moreover, in this study, we already started to question the applicability of the concept in today's working environments. Further in-depth research would be needed to support our impression that the increased integration of the behaviour in the workplace leads to an inapplicability of the concept.

7 References

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Appendix

Appendix A: Literature Overview

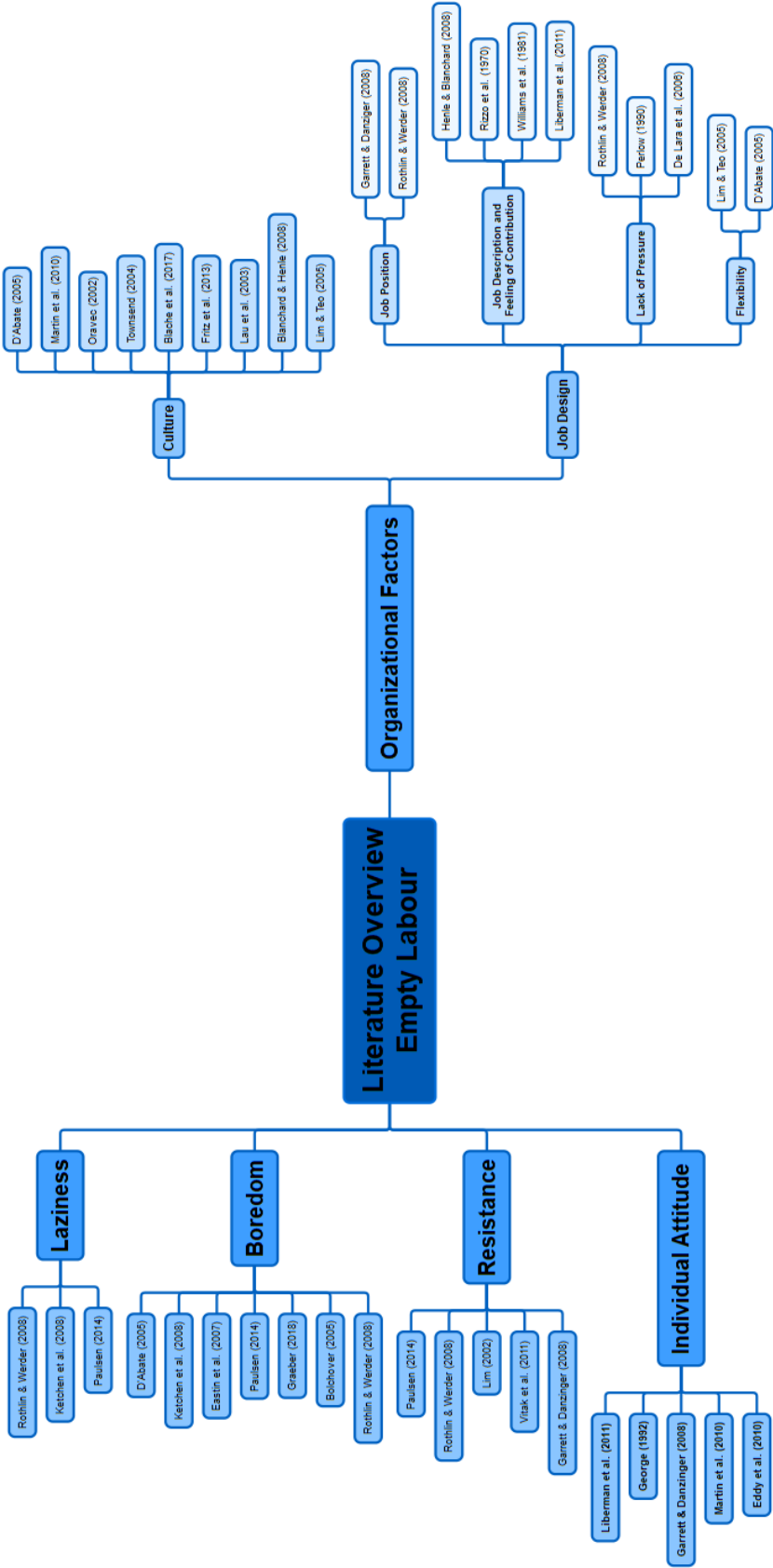


Figure 2: Literature Overview (Source: Personal Collection)

Appendix B: Overview Interview Partner

#	Position	Main Tasks	Bank	Working Experience
1	Client Support Specialist	payment services; review existing clients; cashflow analysis; visiting clients; contact person for clients	Bank 1	13 years
2	Marketing & Project Manager	internal communication; customer complaints	Bank 1	16 years
3	Cash Management Specialist	visiting different branches; contact person for cash management	Bank 1	14 years
4	Reward Partner	compensation and benefits	Bank 2	6 years
5	HR Manager	negotiations with unions; salary review; change management; internal communication	Bank 1	20 years
6	Key Account Manager	relationship management; management of domestic and international clients	Bank 1	19 years
7	Communication & Event Manager	planning customer events; employer branding; community engagement	Bank 2	13 years
8	Senior Software Engineer	IT architecture and integration	Bank 3	15 years
9	Solution Architect	architect; project management	Bank 2	22 years
10	Senior Sales Manager	currencies and foreign exchange	Bank 2	7 years
11	HR Partner	support for management; recruitment; reorganization; salaries	Bank 1	16 years
12	Creditrisk Controller	controlling and analysis of credit risk	Bank 1	5 years

13	Contract and Vendor Performance Manager	creating management agreements; responsibility for suppliers; contract changes	Bank 2	12 years
14	Business Analyst	system integration and development	Bank 1	11 years
15	Solution Architect	supporting the development and testing team; technical setup	Bank 2	12 years
16	Developer	development of features; improvement of working processes	Bank 2	6 years
17	Data Analyst	responsibility for internal IT system	Bank 2	6 years
18	IT Developer	IT and software development	Bank 2	6 years
19	Business Controller	performance analysis; support for the CFO	Bank 2	5 years

Table 1: Overview Interview Partner (Source: Personal Collection)

Appendix C: Coding Network First Research Question

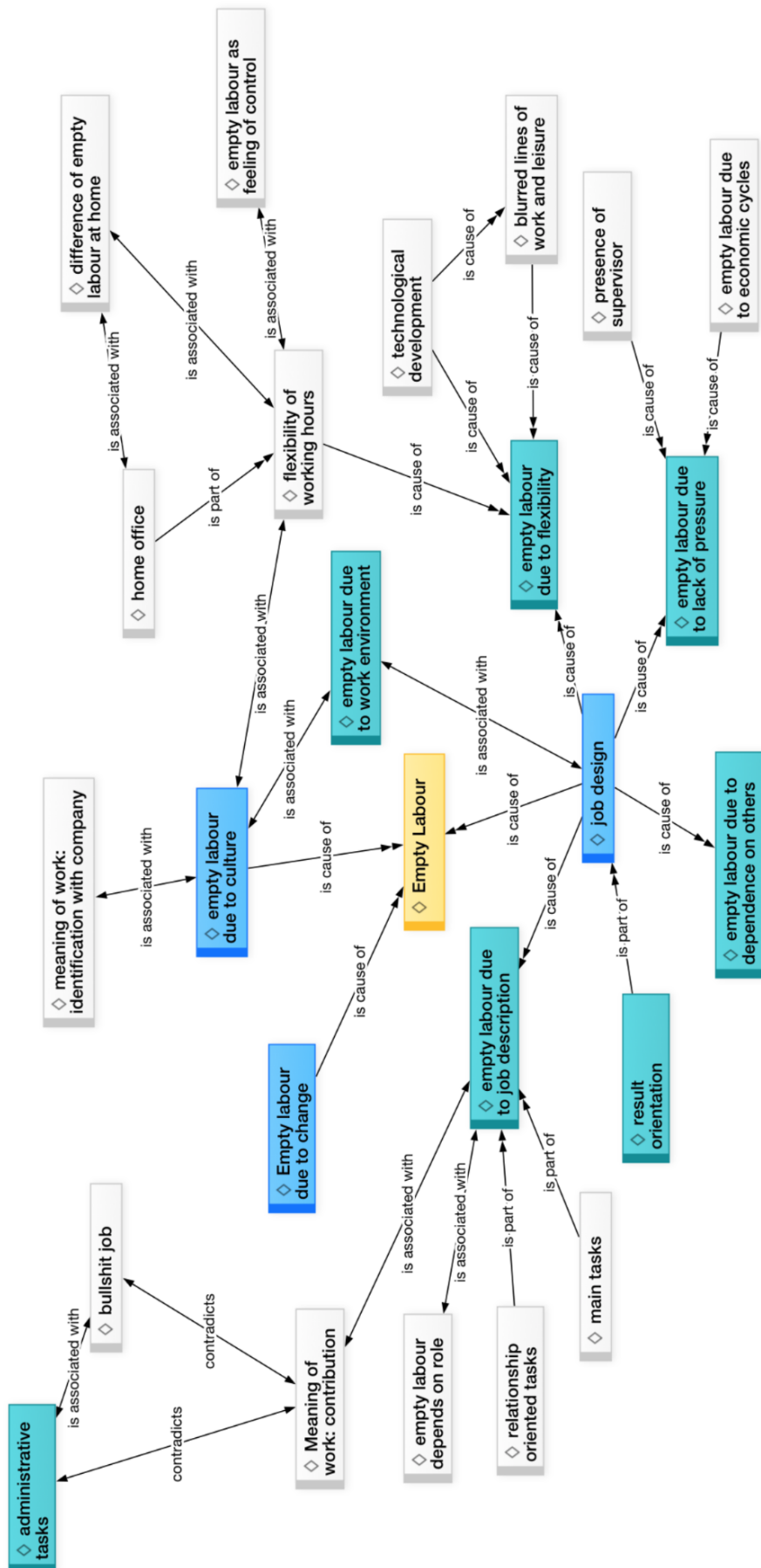


Figure 3: Coding Network First Research Question (Source: Personal Collection)

Appendix D: Coding Network Second Research Question

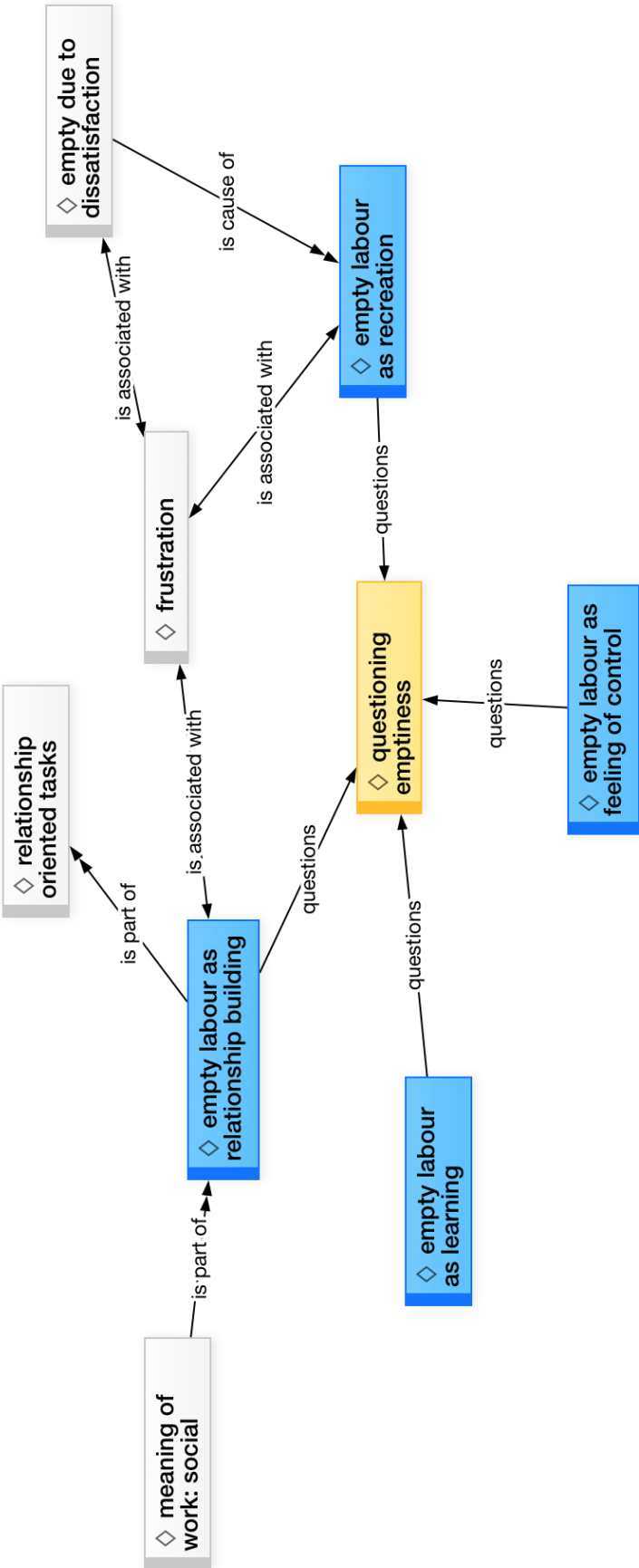


Figure 4: Coding Network Second Research Question (Source: Personal Collection)