SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS AND MANAGEMENT

To Dance at Two Weddings

- How Do Individuals Experience the Tensions of Balancing Exploration and Exploitation?

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Abstract

Title	To Dance at Two Weddings: How Do Individuals Experience the Tensions of Balancing Exploration and Exploitation?
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Date	May 20th, 2022
Aim	The aim of this study is to investigate how individuals handle the tensions of balancing explorative and exploitative work tasks.
Methodology	Using an abductive approach and following the interpretive research traditions, this qualitative case study is based on 12 semi-structured interviews in one single organization.
Theoretical Framework	The theoretical framework is based on organizational learning as well as ambidexterity: organizational and individual. It also includes theory in role-taking and identity, which connects to ambidextrous work on an individual level.
Contributions	Keeping the individual who performs ambidextrous work in focus, the openness for their thoughts and feelings highlights tensions and paradoxes related to performing ambidextrous work. Our findings indicate that while individuals get positive feelings from working ambidextrously, they also experience various challenges. Our contributions include the questioning of whether all individuals should work ambidextrously. We have also identified how some individuals view themselves as explorers, while we would argue that their work is exploitative.
Keywords	Individual Ambidexterity, Exploration, Exploitation, Organizational Ambidexterity, Roles, Identity

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1 Introduction

It is September 2000, and we are at the headquarters of Blockbuster Inc. in Dallas, Texas. The CEO of Blockbuster John Antioco is about to meet Marc Randolph and Reed Hastings, who are the founders of, at that time, a fairly unknown company named Netflix. Being distinctively different from the idea of having on-site video stores all over the country like Blockbuster, Netflix tried to win customers over by being an exclusively online video store, offering a DVD-by-mail rental service. Yet, this business model amused CEO Antioco more than it convinced him of being a viable model for the future. His assessment, which turned out to be fatal, made it easy for Blockbuster to turn down the offer to acquire Netflix for $50 million. 20 years later, and after declaring bankruptcy in 2010, one last open Blockbuster franchise store symbolizes the company's downfall from 'hero to zero'. Meanwhile, as of May 2022, Netflix is worth around $80 Billion.

As this example shows, Blockbuster clearly underestimated the disruptiveness of Netflix's online business model, the disruptiveness of the video-on-demand technology, and therefore ultimately erased itself from the competitive landscape (Sim, 2016; Voigt, Buliga & Michl, 2017). Even though Blockbuster could have likely changed its destiny by acquiring Netflix at that particular time, the bigger question which lingers around this example is one of how organizations can survive in the long run and in the face of change (O'Reilly & Tushman, 2008). This further implies the challenges of adapting to global and dynamic environments characterized by new markets and customers, and new competitors with new (disruptive) business models (O'Reilly & Tushman, 2004). To shed light on how organizations can master the crucial challenge of how to survive, and thus remain relevant and successful in the future, researchers have emphasized the concept of organizational ambidexterity as a solution (Tushman & O'Reilly, 1996).

Organizational ambidexterity refers to an organization's ability to exploit and explore with the same dexterity (O'Reilly & Tushman, 2013). Drawing on organizational learning theory, James March (1991) initially differentiated between the two learning activities of exploration and exploitation. The corresponding challenge for organizations is to sufficiently engage in exploitation to face current demands and to devote enough energy to exploration, in order to deal with ever-changing future demands (Levinthal & March, 1993). Exploration requires the departure from existing knowledge, thus the creation of new knowledge (Benner & Tushman,

2003). It comprises search, risk, discovery, innovation, and flexibility (March, 1991). Learning in exploration occurs through experimentation with new alternatives, concerted variation, and play (Baum, Li & Usher, 2000; March, 1991). Exploitation on the contrary encompasses efficiency, choice, execution, implementation, and production (March, 1991). Essential to exploitation is the refinement and extension of an organization's current competences, existing technologies, as well as paradigms (March, 1991). Learning in exploitation occurs through improvements and refinements, while it builds on existing knowledge (Baum et al., 2000; Benner & Tushman, 2003).

Organizations attempting to pursue exploration and exploitation face the challenge of deciding how to allocate their scarce resources (e.g., financial- and human resources) to both in a balanced way. Levinthal and March (1993, p.105) stated why this is a key, but notwithstanding hard, challenge for organizations: "Survival requires a balance, and the precise mix of exploitation and exploration that is optimal is hard to specify". What exacerbates this issue is that not only are the demands of exploitation and exploration different but also are their potential returns (March, 1991). Organizations generally favor exploitation since it yields short-term benefits, therefore making it significantly less risky and predictable (O'Reilly & Tushman, 2013). In contrast, exploration is inherently risky, making its potential returns distant in time, uncertain, and often negative (March, 1991; O'Reilly & Tushman, 2013). Therefore, dividing attention and resources to both learning activities that feature fundamentally different logics, inevitably leads to tensions (He & Wong, 2004; March, 1991).

Nevertheless, according to Tushman and O'Reilly (1996) it is crucial for organizations to be ambidextrous, as in the ability to reconcile or balance these conflicting demands to their advantage. Three distinctive approaches have been studied in this regard: sequential-, structural-, and contextual ambidexterity (O'Reilly & Tushman, 2013). Sequential ambidexterity refers to the switching or cycling between periods of exploration and exploitation (Goossen, Bazazzian & Phelps, 2012; Tushman & Romanelli, 1985). Organizations adopting a structural approach create different exploratory and exploitative (sub-)units to pursue both activities in a simultaneous way (O'Reilly & Tushman, 2008; 2013). While these approaches emphasize the firm- and business unit level as means through which organizations reconcile the tensions of exploration and exploitation, contextual ambidexterity puts individuals into focus (Gibson & Birkinshaw, 2004). This approach argues

that individuals should make their own decisions on how to allocate their time between exploitation and exploration (Gibson & Birkinsaw, 2004).

Drawing on this underlying idea of contextual ambidexterity, researchers increasingly highlight the central role that individuals might play in solving the 'ambidexterity puzzle' (Birkinshaw & Gupta, 2013; Keller & Weibler, 2015; O'Reilly & Tushman, 2008). Bonesso, Gerli and Scapolan (2014) further critically remark that an exclusive analysis of ambidexterity at the organizational level implicitly neglects how individuals might contribute to a firm's ability to balance exploration and exploitation. Transferring the concept of ambidexterity to the individual level refers to the individual ability to both explore and exploit, and to find synergies between those learning activities (Mom, Van den Bosch & Volberda, 2009; Rogan & Mors, 2014; Tempelaar & Rosenkranz, 2019). In terms of how individuals reconcile the related conflicting demands, the majority of studies argue in favor of a sequential approach (e.g., Bidmon & Boe-Lillegraven, 2019; Keller & Weibler, 2015 Laureiro-Martínez, Brusoni, Canessa & Zollo, 2015). Thus, individuals switch or cycle between exploitation and exploration to operate ambidextrously (Gupta, Smith & Shalley, 2006).

However, switching from exploitation to exploration and vice versa implies that individuals have to cater to multiple roles, or what Birkinshaw and Gibson (2006) label as being comfortable to wear more than one hat. Using a role transition perspective, Tempelaar and Rosenkranz (2019) provide insights on how individuals can cope better with the conflicting demands of exploration and exploitation. However, this study does not reveal how these individuals experience the tensions of working ambidextrously. We have identified this as a general gap in current research on individual ambidexterity and therefore aim to analyze how individuals experience the tensions or conflicting demands when balancing exploratory and exploitative activities.

Furthermore, most scholarly attention in the field of individual ambidexterity so far has been on managers (see, e.g., Keller & Weibler, 2015; Laureiro-Martínez et al., 2015; Mom, Chang, Cholakova & Jansen, 2019; Tushman, Smith & Bins, 2011). Tarba, Jansen, Mom, Raisch & Lawton (2020, p.3) therefore critically note that "much less is known about how organizational members who are not leaders deal with the ambidexterity challenge". To overcome this general lack of research our thesis aims to analyze how both employees

without managerial responsibilities, as well as managers, deal with the challenges that individual ambidexterity poses to them.

In addition, a recent systematic literature review of individual ambidexterity by Pertusa-Ortega, Molina-Azorin, Tari, Pereira-Moliner and López-Gamero (2021) shows that only roughly more than 10% of included studies have been empirical qualitative ones. We see this strong prevalence of empirical quantitative studies (Pertusa-Ortega et al., 2021) as an opportunity to apply a qualitative research approach to gain richer and more nuanced insights into individual ambidexterity.

We focus our study on the individuals in the organization, and how they experience the act of balancing exploration and exploitation. We do not mainly focus on how the organization is affected by the ambidextrous work of its individuals, however, the topic is present throughout the research since it comes naturally when performing a case study within an organization: the employees have the organization in mind when participating in our interviews. What we want to narrow down to is which tensions - conflicting demands - may occur on an individual level, and how the individuals cope with these tensions.

The purpose of our study is therefore to bring attention to individuals who work ambidextrously. The research is of general interest since it can help facilitate individual ambidexterity in organizations. This study could hence help organizations decide on how to balance their exploratory and exploitative focuses optimally, through a deeper understanding of how ambidextrous work is experienced on the individual level. Also, individuals working in ambidextrous settings could benefit from the study, by reflecting actively on how they handle these tensions. We consequently aim to analyze how individuals deal with the challenge of balancing exploration and exploitation, thus how they cope with and resolve the related tensions and competing demands. Our research question, therefore, is as follows:

- *How do individuals experience the tensions of balancing exploratory and exploitative work?*

The case study has been performed within an organization which we have chosen to call 'Innovate-Inc.': more precisely within a department, here called 'Focus New Ideas', which works on developing products (exploitation) that have been suggested by another department within the organization, focused solely on innovation (exploration). Within 'Focus New Ideas', an initiative allocating 10% of each employee's time to innovation (exploration) has

recently been presented. We have performed 12 semi-structured interviews with employees in various positions within the department. The interviews have focused on experiences, feelings, and thoughts related to the initiative.

Our findings, grouped into three main topics related to the structure of the initiative; how the switching of focus affects individuals; and roles/identification, indicate that while individuals get positive feelings, such as freedom, from working ambidextrously, they also experience challenges. Based on findings indicating that not all employees enjoy working ambidextrously, we suggest that structural ambidexterity within teams could be a more suitable approach (O'Reilly & Tushman, 2008). This approach would mean having certain team members focus on exploration, while others solely stick to exploitation, which is, therefore, rather in line with the concept of team ambidexterity (Andriopoulos and Lewis, 2009; 2010; Bledow, Friese, Anderson, Erez & Farr, 2009). We also argue that there are hindrances to finding an optimal ambidextrous structure within the organization, based on individuals identifying with their organization and hence view themselves as explorers even though they would contribute more in an exploitative role. Further, we claim that managers experience contradictory feelings related to the ambidextrous work: while they enjoy letting go of their managerial roles, they feel a responsibility to both act as role models and make sure to protect the initiative.

1.1 Outline of the Thesis

This thesis consists of six sections. Following this introduction, which gives the purpose of the study as well as a brief presentation of our outcomes, is section 2, the literature review. Here we present existing research on the topics of organizational learning and ambidexterity, as well as on role and identification. Our methodology is presented in section 3, which also includes an introduction of the case and of our interview process. Section 4 presents our findings, through excerpt-commentary units (Emerson et al, 1995, cited in Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018) building on quotes from the interviews. The section is divided into three main topics, which are further divided into more distinct themes. In section 5, we make use of the excerpts presented in section 4 as well as the existing research presented in section 2, by discussing these together. Section 6 presents our contributions and limitations of the study. In this section, we also share ideas for future research.

2 Literature Review

The following chapter provides a selective review of the literature on organizational learning, organizational ambidexterity, individual ambidexterity, as well as on role and identity in the context of individual ambidexterity. The first section on organizational learning will introduce the two distinctive learning activities of exploration and exploitation, and their related tensions. After that, we will elaborate on the concept of organizational ambidexterity. Here, we will also describe the three approaches through which organizations can operate ambidextrously. These are sequential-, structural-, and contextual ambidexterity. Finally, we shift the focus to the concept of individual ambidexterity and end this section by connecting this concept to the topics of role and identity.

2.1 Organizational Learning

What makes learning a valuable resource for organizations? According to DeGeus (1988), how fast organizations can learn might be their only sustainable competitive advantage. An increasingly fast-paced and dynamic environment in which organizations operate, even exponentiates the urgency for them to learn, especially to not become inert and irrelevant over time (Dixon, 1992; 2017). The concept of organizational learning has been defined in various ways, albeit most definitions specify it as "a change in the organization that occurs as the organization acquires experience" (Argote & Miron-Spektor, 2011, p.1124).

In his seminal article James March (1991) introduced the two qualitatively distinct and separable learning activities of exploration and exploitation, when he argued that it is key for organizations to exploit existing capabilities, while also exploring new possibilities. *Exploration* implies experimenting with new alternatives, concerted variation, and play (Baum et al., 2000). It requires a more risk-taking, flexible, discovery- and innovation-oriented approach (March, 1991). Furthermore, it leads to and depends on the creation of new knowledge to develop new routines, processes, and competencies; new products and services, or even new business models and technologies for emerging customers and markets (Benner & Tushman, 2003; McGrath, 2001).

Exploitation on the other hand stands for efficiency, execution, production, implementation, or more precisely, the refinement of an organization's current competencies and capabilities (March, 1991). Local improvements, refining existing products and services through the use of existing routines, all yield to learning in exploitation (Baum et al., 2000). To achieve refinement and extension of a company's existing product- and service line, exploitation has to build on existing knowledge and routines, to serve the demands of existing customers in markets that have already been targeted (Benner & Tushman, 2003). From this activity, what can be labeled as an organization's day-to-day business, resulting returns are expected to be positive and predictable in nature (March, 1991).

Aside from defining exploration and exploitation through the lens of organizational learning, other literature streams used different terms to conceptualize these activities (Raisch & Birkinshaw, 2008). Arguing from the perspective of organizational adaption, scholars distinguish between *incremental* and *discontinuous change* (e.g., Tushman & Romanelli, 1985; Volberda, 1996). Drawing on organization theory, Raisch and Birkinshaw (2008) propose the use of two different structures to pursue both *efficiency* and *flexibility*. Based on the research stream of technological innovation, scholars differentiate between *incremental* and *radical innovation* (e.g., Benner & Tushman, 2003; Green, Gavine & Aiman-Smith, 1995).

In this work, we will draw on the notion proposed by James March (1991) that exploration and exploitation are two distinctive and separable learning activities (e.g., Jansen, Van den Bosch & Volberda, 2005; 2006; O'Reilly & Tushman, 2013).

The key challenge derived from these learning activities for an organization is then "to engage in sufficient exploitation to ensure its current viability and, at the same time, to devote enough energy to exploration to ensure its future viability" (Levinthal & March, 1993, p.105). Therefore, organizations that aim for strategic renewal need to explore new ways and exploit their existing knowledge (Crossan, Lane & White, 1999). However, balancing exploration and exploitation inevitably leads to tensions (March, 1991; Levinthal & March, 1993). These two processes not only compete for scarce resources like workforce, time, and money, but also differ in their potential benefits, risks, and time horizons (March, 1991).

O'Reilly and Tushman (2013) further specified these tensions by noting that organizations generally favor exploitation over exploration, because its associated success is more certain

and predictable, less risky, and also more short-term oriented. Exploration on the contrary is inherently inefficient, produces a certain number of bad ideas, and is therefore related to long-term, uncertain, and oftentimes negative returns (O'Reilly & Tushman, 2013). However, without engaging in exploration and solely adapting to its current environment, an organization faces the risk of not being able to adapt to challenges from new environmental demands, which could in turn lead to an organizational decline (Hannan & Freeman, 1984; He & Wong, 2004). In contrast, an overemphasis on experimenting with new alternatives could prevent the refinement and improvement of existing capabilities and knowledge (March, 1991). Even though these tensions between exploration and exploitation exist, balancing both sufficiently should be a central concern for organizations that strive to be relevant in the future and try to avoid failure (He & Wong, 2004; Levinthal & March, 1993; O'Reilly & Tushman, 2013).

2.2 Organizational Ambidexterity

Tushman and O'Reilly (1996) examined how organizations survive long-term in the face of continually changing conditions. They showed that ambidextrous firms – the ones which can juggle explorative and exploitative activities simultaneously – both perform better in the present and have higher chances to succeed in the long run, compared to those firms that put too much effort into either exploration or exploitation (Tushman & O'Reilly, 1996). The term ambidexterity stems from the idea of an individual using both of her/his hands with equal skill, and equal dexterity (Birkinshaw & Gupta, 2013). Transferring this thought process to the corporate world, ambidexterity refers to:

> the ability of an organization to both explore and exploit – to compete in mature technologies and markets where efficiency, control, and incremental improvement are prized and to also compete in new technologies and markets where flexibility, autonomy, and experimentation are needed (O'Reilly & Tushman, 2013, p.324).

Gupta et al. (2006) propose how such a coexistence of both activities could enable positive synergies. These arguments in favor of ambidexterity highlight the essential task for organizations to figure out how to reconcile the related conflicting demands and internal tensions, resulting from pursuing both exploitation and exploration (Raisch & Birkinshaw, 2008).

Consequently, the question that follows concerns how organizations can balance exploration and exploitation specifically, in order to resolve the inherent tensions and more importantly, to operate ambidextrously (Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2009). Over the past decades, three approaches to achieving organizational ambidexterity have been extensively studied: sequential ambidexterity, structural (simultaneous) ambidexterity, and contextual ambidexterity (O'Reilly & Tushman, 2013).

2.2.1 Sequential Ambidexterity

The underlying idea of *sequential ambidexterity* was first introduced by Robert Duncan (1976) when he argued that in order for organizations to initiate and execute innovation, they have to shift and align their structures. Through temporal and punctual changes in their structures and processes organizations switch back and forth between periods of discovering and experimenting and periods of improvements and efficiency (Goossen et al., 2012; Tushman & Romanelli, 1985). Facing dynamic conditions and context changes, firms use these sequential switches to increase their chances of surviving and to gain competitive advantages (Kauppila, 2010; Siggelkow & Levinthal, 2003).

How this switching or cycling between different periods of exploration and exploitation takes place in practice was analyzed by Laplume and Dass (2012). The authors conducted a longitudinal study of an entrepreneurial, mid-sized company in which they analyzed data from its 65-year history. They showed how the company developed new resources and capabilities internally to change its scope from exploitation to exploration, and vice versa, over time. By doing so, the company was able to expand to several countries while also growing and diversifying its product range (Laplume & Dass, 2012).

Brown and Eisenhardt (1997) showed how small electronic companies use rhythmic transition processes and establish semi-structures to cycle between exploration and exploitation. Using such processes and structures supported these companies in their attempts to continuously change and focus on multiple-product innovation, hence shifting their scopes within highly competitive settings (Brown & Eisenhardt, 1997).

Geerts and colleagues (2010) compared how service firms preferred a sequential approach to operate ambidextrously, while manufacturing firms balance exploration and exploitation simultaneously. In their particular study, service firms that relied on sequential ambidexterity

often lacked the necessary resources, internal processes, or support from management to handle exploration and exploitation simultaneously (Geerts, Blindenbach-Driessen & Gemmel, 2010). While these examples show how sequential ambidexterity works in practice, they nevertheless do neither outline how it occurs nor what the transition between exploitation and exploration looks like (O'Reilly & Tushman, 2013). O'Reilly and Tushman (2013) further critically connotated that these transitions inherit the potential to be highly disruptive for organizations.

2.2.2 Structural Ambidexterity

Another approach to solving the question of how to operate ambidextrously is *structural* or *simultaneous ambidexterity*. It follows the idea that organizations have to simultaneously exploit and explore through using separate aligned (sub-)units, departments, and business models (O'Reilly & Tushman, 2008; 2013). The challenges that are inherent to structural ambidexterity are due to the fact that merely setting up these units is not sufficient. Rather, this setup also requires different incentives, competencies, systems, processes, and cultures for exploratory and exploitative units, where each has to be internally aligned (O'Reilly & Tushman, 2008). Organizations need to utilize targeted structural linking mechanisms, a set of values, and a common strategic orientation to hold and link the separate units together (O'Reilly & Tushman, 2004). Connecting them consequently supports both units to leverage shared assets (O'Reilly, Harreld & Tushman, 2009). Once an organization has set up these structural units, they are able to "sense and seize new opportunities through simultaneous exploration and exploitation" (O'Reilly & Tushman, 2013, p.328).

However, the question that follows is how organizations can deal with challenges of misalignments or strategic trade-offs between units (O'Reilly & Tushman, 2013). Researchers have therefore emphasized the central role of the senior team to orchestrate the different units through effective team processes, in order to manage and resolve the aforementioned challenges (O'Reilly & Tushman, 2004; Smith & Tushman, 2005). Drawing on these insights it becomes evident that operating ambidextrously in a simultaneous fashion is less of a structural problem for an organization, but rather a challenge for its senior executives to manage this balance through their leadership behavior (O'Reilly & Tushman, 2011; Smith, Binns & Tushman, 2010). One essential part of managing strategic

contradictions for senior leaders is, for example, making decisions regarding the allocation of resources to both exploratory and exploitative units (Smith & Tushman, 2005).

Overall and according to O'Reilly and Tushman (2011), organizations have to meet five specific criteria in order to successfully achieve ambidexterity through a simultaneous approach: having a senior team that possesses strategies for exploitation and exploration, a compelling strategic intent, an articulated and overarching set of shared values and a vision, separate but aligned organizational architectures for exploratory and exploitative units (i.e., separate systems and cultures), as well as the aforementioned ability of senior leadership to orchestrate both units, hence to resolve tensions such as misalignments (O'Reilly & Tushman, 2011).

2.2.3 Contextual Ambidexterity

The concept of *contextual ambidexterity* refers to the "behavioral capacity to simultaneously demonstrate alignment and adaptability across an entire business unit" (Gibson & Birkinshaw, 2004, p.209). In order to be aligned the business unit's activities have to be carried out in a coherent manner and aim at common targets. The reconfiguration of activities is a necessity for organizations to adapt and meet the challenges of dynamic and changing conditions (Gibson & Birkinshaw, 2004). What distinguishes contextual ambidexterity from sequential and structural ambidexterity is the idea that individuals make their own decisions about how to divide their time between alignment-oriented activities (exploitation) and adaptability-oriented activities (exploration) (Gibson & Birkinshaw, 2004; O'Reilly & Tushman, 2013). Gibson and Birkinshaw (2004, p.211) substantiate this underlying idea of contextual ambidexterity by highlighting that even though ambidexterity "is a characteristic of a business unit as a whole, it manifests itself in the specific actions of individuals throughout the organization". The integration of exploration and exploitation, therefore, becomes more a matter of behavioral and social means, rather than a structural issue (Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2009). In consequence, this means that ambidexterity is achieved whenever individuals agree on whether their unit is sufficiently adaptable and aligned (O'Reilly & Tushman, 2013). For contextual ambidexterity to occur it is crucial that an organization sets up a supportive business unit context characterized by trust, discipline, and stretch (Gibson & Birkinshaw, 2004). Such context provides individuals with the necessary

flexibility to divide their time between adaptation-oriented and alignment-oriented activities. Furthermore, organizations utilize incentives to encourage their employees to engage in both activities, since they are equally valued and rewarded (Gibson & Birkinshaw, 2004).

The study conducted by Adler, Goldoftas and Levine (1999) offers insights into what contextual ambidexterity could look like in practice. It examined how the car manufacturer Toyota manages exploration and exploitation within its production system. In that particular system, production workers were allowed and encouraged to switch between routine production tasks like assembling cars to non-routine tasks as part of, e.g., pilot runs and temporary assignments. To support their workers in both roles, the organization on the one hand enriched routine production work to make its frontline employees more alert to look out for improvements. On the other hand, it provided a set of meta routines that helped frontline workers to change existing routines and to create new ones. These procedures played a central role in making nonroutine tasks more efficient and performative (Adler et al., 1999).

One of the key drawbacks of contextual ambidexterity was described by Kauppila (2010). He argued that this approach to managing ambidexterity does not help the organization to pursue radical forms of exploration and exploitation in a simultaneous fashion. Furthermore, even though individuals might produce exploratory knowledge inside a business unit, it is not quite clear, and rather just assumed, how this knowledge reaches the organizational level of learning (Kauppila, 2010).

2.3 Individual Ambidexterity

One of the key shortcomings of research on organizational ambidexterity is, that it has been predominantly studied on the corporate and business unit level (see, e.g., Adler et al., 1999; He & Wong, 2004; Hill & Birkinshaw, 2014; Lee, Park & Kang, 2018; O'Reilly & Tushman, 2004; O'Reilly et al., 2009). Bonesso et al. (2014, p.394) specified this critique about the existing bulk of research which "neglects the analysis of ambidexterity at the individual level […] assuming that most of the heterogeneity is located at the organizational level". Therefore, researchers have started to emphasize the key role that individuals might play in light of how organizations can be ambidextrous (e.g., Ajayi, Odusanya & Morton, 2017; Birkinshaw & Gupta, 2013; Keller & Weibler, 2015; O'Reilly & Tushman, 2008; 2013; Papachroni & Heracleous, 2020; Schnellbächer & Heidenreich, 2020). In consequence, the

focus shifts towards the question of how organizational members reconcile the conflicting demands of exploration and exploitation, when including both in their everyday work (Mom et al., 2019; Raisch, Birkinshaw, Probst & Tushman, 2009; Rosing & Zacher, 2017). Understanding ambidexterity from a micro-level perspective furthermore pays justice to the fact that it has been conceptualized as a multilevel phenomenon, which includes the individual-, group(team)-, and organizational level (e.g., Jansen, Tempelaar, Van den Bosch & Volberda, 2009; Jansen, Simsek & Cao, 2012; Simsek, 2009).

In a recent systematic review of the literature on individual ambidexterity, Pertusa-Ortega et al. (2021) highlight a number of key issues which currently prevail in this stream of research. One of them concerns the conceptualization of individual ambidexterity, and how to define the tensions in it. While most scholars agree that the tensions in individual ambidexterity stem from mastering the challenges of exploiting current capabilities and exploring new knowledge (e.g., Kobarg, Wollersheim, Welpe & Spörrle, 2017; Prieto-Pastor & Martin-Perez, 2015), there is less clarity about how to define the term (Pertusa-Ortega et al., 2021). Bledow et al. (2009, p.322) for example define individual ambidexterity as “the capability of individuals to perform contradictory activities and switch between different mindsets and action sets”. However, this definition implies that ambidexterity could also refer to a variety of other conflicting tasks like attention to detail versus creativity (Sok & O’Cass, 2015) or selling existing products versus selling new products (Van der Borgh, de Jong & Nijssen, 2017). Therefore, we will build our thesis on the definitions of exploration and exploitation proposed in chapter 2.2 (March, 1991): Hence, on a current conceptualization of individual ambidexterity as the individual ability to both explore and exploit, and to find synergies between these two activities (Mom et al., 2009; Rogan & Mors, 2014; Tempelaar & Rosenkranz, 2019).

In terms of how individuals reconcile conflicting demands of exploration and exploitation, scholars have analyzed the same approaches that prevail for firms to be ambidextrous (Pertusa-Ortega et al., 2021). Notwithstanding the consensus about the fact that individual ambidexterity builds on the idea of contextual ambidexterity, as in individuals making their own decisions regarding how to divide their time between exploration and exploitation (Gibson & Birkinshaw, 2004), other studies also examined how a structural (simultaneous) and/or a sequential approach could be implemented on the individual level (e.g., Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2009; 2010; Bledow et al., 2009; Caniëls & Veld, 2019).

Using a neuroscientific lens, Laureiro-Martínez et al. (2015) opposed the idea of structural individual ambidexterity. The authors studied how 63 managers from various organizational departments such as Marketing or R&D conduct explorative and exploitative activities. Their findings provide evidence that a simultaneous pursuit of both learning activities on the individual level seems rather impossible since "exploration and exploitation are separate behaviors involving different cognitive processes" (Laureiro-Martínez et al., 2015, p.332). Since exploration captures activities such as experimenting, discovering, innovating, and play, while exploitation encompasses refinement, efficiency, and implementation (March, 1991), they pose different cognitive demands to individuals (Bidmon & Boe-Lillegraven, 2020; Laureiro-Martínez et al., 2015). Moreover, being exploitative requires convergent thinking as in a rather analytical, logical, risk-averse approach that feeds on conventional knowledge (Cropley, 2006). Exploration on the contrary builds on divergent thinking, which revolves around a more risk-taking approach (Cropley, 2006). This approach solicits individuals to take on new perspectives in order to experiment with a variety of new (radical) ideas, create new solutions, and gain new knowledge (Cropley, 2006). Considering the above, the study by Laureiro-Martínez and colleagues (2015) concludes that sequencing exploration and exploitation, hence switching between both modes, is how individuals conduct them in practice. This finding is also supported by Gupta et al. (2006), who propose temporal cycling between long periods of exploitation and short periods of exploration as both logical and practical.

Keller and Weibler (2015) analyzed how middle managers operate ambidextrously. Using a sample size of 179 managers, their research concludes how these decision-makers regularly switch between exploitative activities to solve their day-to-day business and exploring new alternatives (Keller & Weibler, 2015). Adler et al. (1999) further elaborated on the advantages of a sequential approach to individual ambidexterity. The authors underline that switching between exploratory and exploitative activities on the one hand decreases the risk of confusion for individuals, and on the other hand allows them to have a greater focus on their current tasks (Adler et al., 1999). Consequently, we will argue in line with Laureiro-Martínez et al. (2015) that individuals have to switch between exploration and exploitation, in order to reconcile the conflicting demands inherent to this challenge.

While the aforementioned studies show how individuals practically deal with the competing demands of exploration and exploitation, another issue concerns the specific skills and

characteristics individuals have to possess to be ambidextrous (Pertusa-Ortega et al., 2021). Birkinshaw and Gupta (2004) conducted a qualitative study through the lens of contextual ambidexterity on a variety of employees including senior managers and front-line workers. The authors identified four ambidextrous behaviors in individuals: ambidextrous individuals take the initiative and are alert to opportunities beyond the confines of their own job; they are cooperative and seek out opportunities to combine their efforts with others; they are brokers, always looking to build internal linkages, and lastly; ambidextrous individuals are multitaskers who are comfortable wearing more than one hat (Birkinshaw & Gibson, 2004, p.49).

The next section will deal more specifically with the fact that ambidextrous individuals have to 'wear more than one hat', based on the demand to perform two different roles (Birkinshaw & Gibson, 2004).

2.3.1 Role & Identity in Individual Ambidexterity

Current research has outlined one of the key challenges of individual ambidexterity which lies in "the multiplicity and divergence of organizational roles, to which individuals need to cater when exploiting and exploring" (Tempelaar & Rosenkranz, 2019, p.1517). A role is a comprehensive set of behaviors and attitudes which constitutes a strategy for coping with a recurrent set of situations, and which others expect of individuals in these contexts (Friedman & Podolny, 1992; March, 1994; Turner, 1990). Through allocating role assignments, organizations place individuals within the organizational contexts (Tempelaar & Rosenkranz, 2019). These different roles furthermore include different corresponding role identities (Floyd & Lane, 2000). By developing role identities, individuals not only make sense of their roles and develop an understanding of themselves, but they also utilize these roles to situate themselves in the broader organizational context (Turner, 1990). Furthermore, an identity within the organizational context comprises values, goals, beliefs, stereotypic traits, as well as knowledge, skills, and abilities (Ashforth, Harrison & Gorley, 2008).

Tempelaar and Rosenkranz (2019) studied how individuals identify with and enact multiple roles when operating ambidextrously. The authors further adopted a role transition lens to examine how individuals integrate both exploration and exploitation. Role transition refers to "the psychological movement into or out of a role" (Tempelaar & Rosenkranz, 2019, p.1521)

and encompasses a continuum ranging from role segmentation to role integration (Tempelaar & Rosenkranz, 2019). Segmentation in this context refers to individuals who strictly separate their role identities when being engaged in exploitation or exploration, while integration means that individuals actively search for and integrate similarities from both activities (Ashforth et al., 2008; Tempelaar & Rosenkranz, 2019). Based on data from 120 strategic account managers, the authors conclude that role segmenters are rather conflicted because of the various diverging demands that exploration and exploitation pose to them. Role integrators in contrast embrace the advantages of both roles and actively leverage the related different knowledge pools. Therefore, they avoid silo thinking when operating exploratory or exploitative (Tempelaar & Rosenkranz, 2019).

Another recent study on role switches between exploitation and exploration has been conducted by Bidmon and Boe-Lillegraven (2020). As part of their qualitative work, the authors looked into how and why individual switching resistance unfolded, as well as how individuals overcame their resistance to switch. Furthermore, they specifically outlined the process that leads up to switching resistance. However, the setting of this study implied that individuals (managers & non-managers) were forced to switch by request since they worked under strict top-down control. The authors, therefore, noted that such imposed shifts between exploration and exploitation display a significant contrast to a bottom-up, thus more autonomous shifting between roles (Bidmon & Boe-Lillegraven, 2020).

2.4 Chapter Summary

Our literature review highlighted how organizations can use different approaches to achieve ambidexterity, hence reconciling the conflicting demands of exploration and exploitation. However, sequential and structural ambidexterity specifically focuses on the organizational level. As seen, solely contextual ambidexterity highlights the key role of individuals for organizational ambidexterity.

To further discuss the role individuals may play in organizational ambidexterity, we consequently introduced the concept of individual ambidexterity. We clarified how ambidexterity on the individual level requires switching or cycling between periods of exploration and exploitation, which implies that individuals need to engage in multiple

(exploratory and exploitative) roles posing different demands to them. Lastly, we presented recent studies revolving around how individuals switch between exploration and exploitation.

3 Methodology

This section will revolve around our methodology throughout this study. Starting with the philosophical foundations for our thesis, we will present the ontological and epistemological backgrounds that have guided our research. After that, we will continue by describing how we have designed our research as well as how we practically handled the research process: the background to our choice of case study and the process of collecting and analyzing data. We will, throughout this section, present the case company, which we have chosen to call 'Innovate-Inc.', and the department within the organization on which our research is focused, which we have chosen to call 'Focus New Ideas'. Before ending this methodology section, we will share our reflections regarding reflexivity, reliability, and credibility, as well as our methods to keep these issues in mind.

3.1 Philosophical Grounding

With a starting point in an interpretive research tradition: while looking into how individuals deal with tensions in the workplace we see reality as socially constructed (Prasad, 2015). Contrasting to a positivist ontology, the interpretive traditions highlight subjectivity and believe in a reality that depends on the social interpretations and sensemaking, and that exists in the human consciousness: that multiple realities can exist and our world is socially constructed (Prasad, 2015). We have hence avoided accepting reification: treating social constructions as objective facts (Prasad, 2015), throughout our work, and have rather tried to dig deep in our interviews. This means that part of our assignment as researchers has been focused on interpreting the statements from the individuals that we have interviewed, and to be able to do this successfully we need to have knowledge of, and an understanding of, their realities (Prasad, 2015).

Applying the Symbolic Interactionism (SI) research tradition, individual sensemaking is heavily influencing our work: in this tradition, the individual's interpretation of a social situation is centered around the self (Prasad, 2015). In line with the interpretive traditions, our aim has been to understand e.g., the construction of roles and identities when individuals perform ambidextrous work (Prasad, 2015). Therefore, role-taking and identity are central to

our analysis, and we acknowledge the existence of multiple, subjective realities. This is present in our discussion when looking into how individuals identify with their employer and with being creative (see 5.4 “Am I an Explorer?”). By looking into the tensions of individual ambidexterity, and how individuals balance these paradoxical demands in the workplace, this thesis emphasizes individuals’ interpretations of their own situations. In line with the SI tradition, we try to interpret and draw conclusions based on semi-structured interviews (Prasad, 2015). By using follow-up questions when the interviewees make statements, we have gotten a deeper insight into the individuals’ minds and have hence tried to avoid misinterpretations as well as overinterpretations. The semi-structured interview format puts the individuals in focus by allowing them to elaborate on what they perceive as important. Also in our work with analyzing the statements made in the interviews, the interpretive filter becomes clear: our role as researchers is of great value for the result of the research, both based on us participating in the interviews and interpreting the material (Prasad, 2015).

3.2 Research Design

Our data collection has been performed through individual, semi-structured interviews, where we met the interviewees in person. Meeting face to face gave us a rich insight into the context and surroundings of the interviewee, which may have affected the individual during the interview. A semi-structured interview format allowed us to follow up on interesting turns, comments, formulations, and reactions, which is in line with the SI tradition since it lets us focus on the interviewees’ lifeworlds (Kvale, 1983, cited in Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). The interview questions that we have used have been mainly meaning-centered and focused on the individual (Prasad, 2015). This method was chosen to help investigate our research question: “How do individuals experience the tensions of balancing exploratory and exploitative work?”. The full interview guide is presented in Appendix 1. Below, the main topics on which the interview questions focused are presented:

- How the individuals understand the 10% initiative and its meaning
- How the individuals experience the way the organization has chosen to balance exploration/exploitation (10% of the time for innovation)
- How do individuals feel about innovation - How does innovation take place?

- How do individuals feel hindered or supported to balance tasks - how do they experience this process?
- How does the individuals' self-image depend on the work task in focus, or trying to balance exploration/exploitation?
- More focused questions based on themes popping up in the interviews, in line with the open-ended interview format in SI (Prasad, 2015). These questions have been dynamic and focus on finding out more details about the interviewee's thoughts and feelings. By asking for details regarding "what's" and "how's", the outcome is more detailed and we as researchers get a better understanding and insight into the interviewee's lifeworld (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015, cited in Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018).

We did not focus on a search for confirmation in the field but rather to explore the topic: in line with SI, our research method was inductive rather than deductive (Prasad, 2015). However, as we entered the field with background knowledge of existing theories and results, and added on theoretical links throughout the study as interesting themes show up, the approach was not purely inductive but moved between an inductive and deductive research method (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018).

Applying this abductive (Alvehus, 2020) method, we hence moved between interpreting the interviewees' lifeworlds and focusing our research. This was practically done by allowing interesting turns to take place in the interviews through follow-up questions as well as unplanned, longer, and sometimes rather detailed conversations regarding a certain topic, at the cost of time to get deep into other topics. Throughout the interviews, we always made sure that all of the main topics in the interview guide were covered, however, the semi-structured format could e.g., result in one of the interviews focusing more than 30 minutes of the full 60 minutes on a topic very different from what the previous interview had focused on. In case the interviewee naturally elaborated on an issue related to the initiative, which we were not previously aware of, we would try to dig deeper into the interviewee's experience and put a lot of focus on this. This could sometimes result in too little time to dig deep into all the other topics, however, we saw a great value in expanding on what the interviewees themselves thought of when asked about the initiative. This is an example of how the semi-structured format gives the interviewee space and hence contributes to our

insights into the interviewees' lifeworlds (Kvale, 1983, cited in Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). To facilitate our analytical work to follow the interviews, and to avoid misinterpreting our material (Emerson et al, 1995, cited in Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018) once not being in the context, we used confirmatory questions whenever possible. This helped make sure that our understanding of what the interviewee had stated was the understanding that he or she was aiming for, and it was practically done by asking the questions multiple times in different ways, and sometimes by getting back to the same question later on in the interview. Another way of confirming our understanding could be to put what the interviewee said in other words to get a confirmative agreement.

3.3 Research Process

3.3.1 Case Study: Background and Access

We gained access to the organization, 'Innovate-Inc.', after reaching out to an organizational member in a management position, whom we will call Alex, responsible for a department focused solely on innovation. An initial message via LinkedIn was followed by a phone call, during which we discussed our research aims and how the research could best be performed within, as well as contribute to, the organization. Based on our ideas, Alex recommended another department within the organization: 'Focus New Ideas'. The recommendation was based on the recent initiative within Focus New Ideas, where each employee was to put 10% of their time on innovation while managing their daily business in the remaining 90%. Alex presented our idea to the colleague responsible for the initiative within Focus New Ideas, Charlie, and facilitated our contact. After that, the planning of the project was initiated by us responding to a request of providing Charlie with a one-pager presenting the project and our research, which could be distributed within Focus New Ideas to attract co-workers interested in participating. Charlie helped us by scheduling thirteen interviews with individuals in various positions within the department: four in managerial responsibilities, and nine without formal managerial responsibilities, however, three of these individuals had team leader positions. For the research to gain broader insight and understanding of how the initiative works in practice, Charlie planned interviews with engineers and product owners as well as with project managers. Before we started the interview process, we had a short meeting with

Charlie where we went through our research as well as the 10% initiative and its background, however, very few details were shared regarding the initiative at this point since we wanted to avoid getting into the interviews with colored minds.

We were informed that the initiative was introduced recently and that some units had started in December, whereas others had started in January. Our interviews were scheduled over the last week of March and the first week of April, after our first contact with the organization was initiated in late February. In a meeting with Charlie later on in the process, we gained more insight into the initiative. We learned that the idea was to not set up any structures or demands but to let the employees find their own preferred ways of working. It was clearly stated that the 10% of the time that was for innovation had the same priority as the remaining 90% of the time, which was allocated to ordinary work tasks, and that each employee was expected to participate. There were no follow-up structures or expectations from management, other than for the employees to put 10% of their time into learning and/or innovation.

Throughout the interview process, we realized that many of the teams had chosen to allocate every other Friday to the 10% initiative, and called these days “free Fridays”. However, some teams allocated every other Wednesday or each Friday before lunch, whereas other teams did not schedule the initiative at all, but let the members try to squeeze it in whenever suitable.

3.3.2 Data Collection

Each interview was one hour long and between the interviews we had scheduled 30 minutes to briefly go through the responses and make notes of the most important themes and our interpretations. This helped us remember the interview better when reviewing the material afterwards, and also facilitated the coding process (see 3.3.3 Data Analysis). Following Alvesson’s (2011) arguments that the size of the group in an interview may affect the responses, we only held individual interviews.

The interviews were scheduled over two weeks, divided into five days. At the beginning of each interview day, Charlie met us in the lobby and showed us to the meeting room that was booked for the day. A few of the interviews were rescheduled due to illness and

communication issues, and one of them was canceled. This resulted in twelve interviews in total. At the time slot planned for the interview that got canceled, we instead had a meeting with Charlie, who at this point provided us with deeper information about the initiative: how and why it was planned, thoughts and expectations from management, and what outcomes the organization hoped for (see 3.3.1 Case Study: Background and Access). This contributed to our understanding of the initiative and the fact that we had this meeting when only a few interviews were left meant that it added on to our view from the previous interviews, rather than sending us into the process with an idea of the initiative matching the plan from management. To entirely avoid getting biased or colored by information is not possible and already after having the first interview, we started to build our own view of the initiative. This contributed to the interviews changing over time - since information gained in the first interviews could be integrated into the latter ones. The interviews were always based on open questions, however, oftentimes they ended in discussions about the initiative and in these cases, our background information could contribute to our understanding of the individuals' feelings and thoughts.

As we were not allowed to record the interviews, they were fully transcribed while performed. The transcriptions include the 12 interviews with managers, middle managers, and subordinates in the same department, divided over multiple teams. The various roles were planned to facilitate noticing discrepancies in the experiences. In Appendix 2, a list of the interviewees; whether they have managerial responsibilities; their time in the organization; and their gender-neutral aliases used in the thesis is presented. As mentioned, 13 interviews were planned but interview number 7 was canceled. Both of the researchers were present in all the interviews, both for practical reasons such as to be able to handle the transcriptions, but also to be able to observe more details and to further deepen the analysis that followed through discussions with each other.

The transcripts were produced during the interviews. To make it possible to capture most of what was said, one of the researchers focused on transcribing the interview and the other researcher led the interview. However, when having follow-up questions or wanting clarifications, the researcher who transcribed also joined the discussion. The transcriptions focused on capturing as much as possible, word by word, of what the interviewee said. Taking the notes word by word was necessary to be able to analyze the data based on "what's" and "how's" (Gubrium & Holstein 1997, cited in Rennstam & Wästerfors 2018) and

also to minimize the risk of misinterpretations when going through the material. After the interviews, the transcripts were anonymized with respect to names, organization name, units, et cetera, and sent via email to the participants, who were asked to validate the material, while at the same time given the opportunity to request further anonymization of the material.

Some participants responded to our emails, confirming the material and our use of it. However, not all participants responded. Therefore, we reminded them by another email, following up on the first one, asking them to respond before May 13th in case they wanted to object to the script or to any information in it. To this email, the rest of the interviewees responded, accepting the scripts.

3.3.3 Data Analysis

The analyzing process of this research has taken place both during and between the interviews, as well as once these were all finalized. By starting the analyzing process already in the interview, we acknowledge our roles as researchers as well as the focus on the interviewees' lifeworlds (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015, cited in Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). Actively analyzing the material right after each interview was practically done by a brief discussion and noting the strongest themes/focus from the interview. This enabled us to bring in the context and account for things that we noticed at the moment. We have been careful not to read in exogenous meanings or to over-interpret our material since the meaning of the words should come from the interviewees themselves (Emerson et al, 1995, cited in Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). The analysis right after, and during, each interview has also helped us interpret the interviewee's answers with the context in mind. The plentiful use of follow-up questions with a focus on "what"- and "how"-questions has helped make sure that we do not over-interpret or misinterpret the information (Kvale & Brinkmann 2015, cited in Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). This brief analysis work was hence a very valuable complement to the more thorough analyzing process that was performed once all interviews were finalized. The latter analysis process enabled us to use insights from the interviews as a collective in the process of analyzing the script from each interview and will be described below.

Once the interviews were completed, we put time to go through the transcripts. This work included spell checking and anonymizing the material, as well as summarizing the material by focusing on the most important topics in each interview. Going through the material was necessary to be able to anonymize it before sending it for respondent validation, but it also helped us get close to the material. Working with the material, not the least summarizing it to find relevant and heavily influencing topics, functioned as part of the analyzing process. As Rennstam & Wästerfors (2018), argue: spending time with the data, e.g., by re-reading the material over and over again, may very well contribute to new insights and a deeper analysis.

Codifying our data has facilitated for us to discover patterns, in the form of recurring experiences and/or thoughts and ideas, in our research material and has hence given us a helpful overview for the analysis (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). The coding was practically performed by going through the transcripts to look for themes: with our research question in mind, we went through the material looking for quotes relating, in one way or another, to the question. In some interviews, strong themes and points of view were obvious: these had been noted in the summaries which facilitated finding themes and quotes related to those themes. As we found quotes in the material that suited recurring themes, these were used for the findings part to show how the interviewees reasoned.

Throughout our analysis, we interpret the 10% innovation-initiative as exploratory work, in line with the definitions by March (1991). The remaining 90% of the individuals' work time is hence viewed as exploitative work. When analyzing the material, we focused on what was said, but also on how the information was delivered: analyzing the "what's" and the "how's" together has contributed to a deeper insight into the interviewees' perceptions (Gubrium & Holstein 1997, cited in Rennstam & Wästerfors 2018). Analyzing the interviews while performing them, by asking a lot of follow-up questions, as well as right after, by noting strong themes, helped us with this since we then had the context in mind and could make sure not to misinterpret or misread the material. The meticulous transcriptions were also helpful for analyzing "what's" and "how's" by stating the interviewees' exact words and not only the main point of their answers to our interview questions.

An abstraction of the data has been performed by the three steps of distilling: reducing data into shorter themes; categorizing: creating categories based on the data or even before the interviews, based on previous research and expectations; and interpreting: trying to find the

meaning behind the words spoken (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015, cited in Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). Once the meaning of the spoken word has been interpreted and categorized into topics, the quotes from the different interviews can be analyzed together. In our work with the analysis, once the material from the interviews was codified through the distilling process, we sorted it by categorizing themes and ideas based on our re-reading and summarizing of the material. To portray these themes, we found matching quotes in the transcripts, which facilitated the following analysis. Through categorical reduction, we then selected the dominating, recurring topics as focus areas for the analysis (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). The reduction of the interviews resulted in six themes, of which three had one sub-theme each. After that, we tried to interpret these themes to find the meaning behind them and hence be able to group our themes into broader topics. This work resulted in three main topics: The organizational structure of the initiative/of ambidexterity; Changing between exploitative and exploratory work; and Roles/Identity. These topics are also what we have chosen to focus our literature review on, and they link back to our research question, which is phrased "How do individuals experience the tensions of balancing exploratory and exploitative work?", by giving an insight into how the interviewees' experience their ability to balance exploration and exploitation: in this case, the 10% of their work time focused on exploration and the remaining 90% focused on the exploitation. As we, in the interview process, recurrently stumbled upon certain themes, e.g., role-taking and identity in the workplace, we increased our theoretical knowledge and background on these themes in parallel with interviewing and analyzing our outcome, to further deepen the analysis.

When presenting our findings, we wished to sort the data in a way that facilitated analytical induction Therefore, we started with the most straightforward quotes to then share the more detailed and complicated cases. To make this possible, the sorting process both included picking quotes suitable for each theme and sorting them based on complexity where the quote with low complexity was presented first. This helps the reader understand the researchers' main point early on, to then be able to see how more complex cases can be linked to the same issue (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018).

Finding connecting sub-themes has contributed to a further deepened analysis. In three of the themes, there were obvious differences in experiences of the initiative, between individuals with, respectively without, managerial responsibilities. These differences were highlighted by creating sub-themes, where the excerpts connecting to those differences were presented.

3.4 Reflexivity, Credibility and Limitations

Focusing our study on exploring subjective meanings, in line with the interpretive research traditions (Prasad, 2015) implies that the material cannot be analyzed objectively: a qualitative case study is overall not suited to be generalized (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018). The interviewees as well as the case organization have influenced the outcome, and us being part of the context, even if for a brief period of time, may affect our interpretations of the material. We acknowledge the biases and the subjectivity that will be present in the material, and that our findings are influenced by the organization, its members, and its culture as well as by the industry and by the work culture in Sweden, where the research was performed.

According to Alvesson & Sköldberg (2018), reflexivity is about being aware of different aspects at the same time: they argue that the concept of reflexivity is "the very ability to break away from a frame of reference and to look at what it is *not* capable of saying" (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018, p. 327). Reflexivity hence contradicts simply extending conclusions drawn from your results to a different context or applying theory produced in one context to another one. For us, reflexivity has been vital when working on our case study, and we have been forced to work with, and account for the power of, interpretations throughout the process.

Our abductive method corresponds to some reflexivity in our analysis process. As mentioned above (see 3.3.3. Data Analysis), recurring thoughts and ideas presented in the interviews have affected our focus area for the analysis. One example of this is how we put focus on roles and identity, and hence included background literature and previous research on this topic. This focus grew out of the interviews and proved to suit our research very well, providing an interesting angle for the analysis. This is an example of how the semi-structured format of the interviews helped us deepen our understanding, by including further questions related to roles and identity in the following interviews.

There are limitations to our research. Our interviews have been focused on the individuals, through examining feelings, thoughts, and ideas on the individual level and perceived tensions from the balancing of explorative and exploitative work tasks. However, these individuals are part of an organization and their statements have to be interpreted in that context. We recurrently experienced the interviewees being focused on the organization when they answered our questions. When asked about the 10% initiative, individuals naturally

focused on the organization’s outcome of the initiative. Even though our semi-structured interview format allowed us to push the interviewees in the direction we wanted, and we tried to lead them back to the individual perspective by rephrasing our questions or specifying them, the individual experiences were often trailed back to some kind of outcome for the organization. This may be an effect of the organizational context influencing the individuals: the interviews were held during work hours, in the company’s buildings, focused on their work situation, and were scheduled by management. Had the interviews been planned differently, perhaps the outcome of them would have been different as well.

When reflecting upon our material and the possible limitations, we are influenced by Schaefer & Alvesson (2020), who argue that one has to be careful to trust the interview statements as robust, objective evidence. Alvesson (2011) states that the interview situation, including structure; size (group interview, couples or individual); and media, can affect the responses. The issue of interviewees commonly circling back to the organizational outcomes of the initiative raised concerns regarding the validity and credibility of their responses. If the case was that they were affected by the interviews being performed at the organization’s buildings, we were concerned with whether their answers were fully honest. Alvesson & Kärreman (2007) highlights that individuals can view interviews as a possibility of political action rather than as the study that it is, which can lead to interviewees reporting what may favor them. Our frequent use of follow-up questions and questions phrased in different ways, combined with challenging statements at times, helped us to be reflexive and interpret the interviewees’ statements. To avoid interviewees not daring to share their honest thoughts, we made sure to inform them about the anonymity of the material before embarking on the interviews.

Another big impact on the outcome of the study is of course our focus of the research. The same interviewees, in the same context, could have contributed to very different results in case the questions had been focused differently. Also the impact of us as researchers focusing our interpretations on our research questions is of value: even the same responses could have been interpreted very differently and hence provided different conclusions in case the research was focused differently. Our background knowledge and experiences also affected the interview situations through how we handled follow-up questions or general small talk before the interview started: e.g., a researcher very familiar with the industry or the interests

of the interviewee, or even just one of the same age and with the same frames of reference, could affect the atmosphere during the interview and hence the results.

3.5 Chapter Summary

This section has clarified how we place our research within the interpretive traditions, more specifically in symbolic interactionism, which emphasizes subjectivity and looks into how individuals create meaning. In line with this, our research focuses on understanding individuals' subjective realities. The interviewees' interpretations as well as our own are of great value, and can not be neglected. Our semi-structured interview format, focusing on depth rather than width, suits the interpretive traditions well. Section 3 has also taken us through the design and process of our research and has shared the limitations of our research as well as how we have worked to stay reflexive.

4 Findings

The Analysis is based on the 12 interviews conducted with employees in various positions at Innovate-Inc.'s 'Focus New Ideas' department. The interviews resulted in a number of recurring themes, which are all presented more in detail below.

Sydney, Kim, Shannon and Cory have managerial responsibilities and Jordan, Robin and Kelly have team leader positions. The rest of the interviewees do not have managerial responsibilities. However, they have various positions in the organization (See Appendix 2 for overview).

The six recurring themes are summarized and presented below. The themes are divided into three main topics: 4.1 Individuals wishing for structure - "I'll just do it later", focusing on the structure of the initiative; 4.2 Exploration: a break from daily routines - "Friday I'm in Love", focusing on meaningfulness; and 4.3 Where do I fit in? - "Of Course I'm a Creative Person", focusing on role and identity. The topics include a number of themes, of which some present sub-themes focusing on the experiences of individuals in managerial positions. Below, the structure of the findings is summarized:

Main topic	Theme	Subtheme
Individuals Wishing for Structure - "I'll Just Do it Later"	Flexibility: a Messy Blessing	Managers Missing Out
	What Happens to My Idea?	-
	Who Innovates?	-
Exploration: a Break From Daily Routines - "Friday I'm in Love"	Breaking Out of the Cage	Managers Letting Go of Themselves
	Switching Between Roles - the Burden of Wearing (too) Many Hats	Leading by Example and Protecting the Initiative
Where Do I Fit In? - "Of Course I'm a Creative Person"	"Innovate-Inc:ers are Innovative"	-

Table 4.1: Overview of Findings

4.1 Individuals Wishing for Structure - “I’ll Just Do it Later”

One of the main topics that we have interpreted from our data relates to structure. The organization had presented an initiative without giving any details. There were no suggestions or demands when it came to structure in terms of scheduling, what to do, how to differentiate between learning and innovation, or how to bring your ideas further. This led to some frustration and confusion among the employees, while they enjoyed the flexibility and sometimes perceived it necessary to be innovative. Also the issue of prioritizations recurred in the interviews. Employees were told that learning and innovation had the same priority as the regular project work. However, the 90% time often managed to be seen as more important than the 10% innovation time.

4.1.1 Flexibility: a Messy Blessing

The initiative does not suggest any structure when it comes to scheduling. Many of the interviewees experienced paradoxical feelings towards how freely the 10% initiative was formulated. There were positive feelings from the freedom:

> *“[...] the whole idea with the 10% initiative is that you are free and it's outside the regular processes. While formalized processes are needed for the going projects, [talking about ongoing projects; customers], the ideas are already there and it needs other rules. So innovation needs to be completely free to think outside the box.”* (Robin)

When asked about how this freedom feels, the interviewee elaborated:

> *“It’s a great feeling to play around with the ideas that you have and you're not brought down by needs and demands and like that… you're completely free and it feels like a stone off your chest. It creates… you appreciate the employer for having this initiative - they will get loyalty as well from it.”* (Robin)

While the freedom was seen as positive for innovative work, it was also experienced as frustrating by many of the interviewees, not the least since a lack of structures and routines

were experienced. Jordan was not convinced that the loosely defined initiative is the right way to go:

> *"... Because it's very free we don't have a specific process for that - [...]We were told that it can be anything: something drastic or something very small. But I think it doesn't work very well because it's so free."* (Jordan)

Interviewees had different perceptions of the scheduling of the 10%. Even though the initiative was very free, most interviewees felt that their hands were tied by how their team had chosen to schedule:

> *"[...] if it's a big project it would be good to have a week in a row but you would feel distracted from your other work and be stressed about it. Stopping for two days - for some it's very hard but for others it's easy… that depends on your mindset I guess."* (Kelly)

When asked about putting more time than the team had scheduled, the freedom was not obvious:

> *"I guess I could ask my managers if it's possible to spend more time on it, or just sneak away sometimes (laugh)."* (Kelly)

Also Lee shared an uncertainty about the flexibility related to the initiative:

> *"... so for you the problem is not 10 or 15% - but in case you need more time for your idea, how would your perspective change then?"* (Interviewer)
>
> *"I think that could change… Also it's not said 10% per week or month, I mean you could put 10% as two weeks in a row."* (Lee)
>
> *"Would you feel free to put 2 weeks on your idea?"* (Interviewer)
>
> *"No not really. But more like, if I have a good idea, I would allocate more time to it. but it's not set in stone how to allocate the time. I'm not sure what management has thought about that."* (Lee)

Not only the scheduling is loosely defined but also what to spend time on. Jordan shared the experience of how the team members are sometimes not sure what to do with their 10% time:

“... But no one told us what stages to go through, what resources we have, what to do if we have no ideas - they just say we have these learning opportunities.” (Jordan)

“Can you learn something that doesn't help the company?” (Interviewer)

“That you cannot do, they say [...] but it's difficult to know what you can do and what you can not do. I think they need to put more management on it.” (Jordan)

Overall, the initiative is loosely defined and whether or not individuals are able to plan their time 100% freely, both with regard to time and focus, is not obvious. Some of the interviewees also experience unclear lines between the 90% time and the 10% time:

“Yes... I do [think about 10% project in the 90% time], I realized. That was one of the reasons for us to initiate backlogs in the management team. But now, it's like you get used to thinking about new stuff... Because it happens automatically - a lot of people now know in the beginning, middle of that week what to focus on when it's free Friday.” (Sydney)

The quote indicates that innovative ideas pop up during the 90% work. Being able to capture these ideas, Sydney can get back to them on the scheduled innovation time. For Sydney, this seems to work well after some adjustments.

4.1.1.1 Managers Missing Out

People in managerial roles seem to down-prioritize the initiative more than others. Ashley, who is employed within the management team, shares feelings about stress related to the 10% initiative. The management team allocates every Friday before lunch to the 10% initiative, and both starts and ends the session with a briefing. In below conversation between Ashley and the interviewer, it becomes clear that not all the time allocated for innovating is actually used:

“Me personally, I use 80% I think and on the team level [management team], perhaps 60%.” (Ashley)

“Did you have those meetings today?” (Interviewer)

> *"Yes."* (Ashley)
>
> *"And how many..?"* (Interviewer)
>
> *"(laughter) there was one meeting where at least half the group joined, on one hour… so I guess maybe 50% were engaged in their 10%."* (Ashley)

On management level, the initiative seems to be down-prioritized when meetings and other ad hoc-events occur. Even though managers are part of the initiative, many of them seem to prioritize their 90% time higher than the innovation time. Kim has a managerial position, and has trouble making time for innovation. When asked about time allocation, and how the initiative has been handled practically:

> *"I can say that I'm one of those who are late bloomers (laugh). I have too much other stuff to handle that I prioritize more than 10%. But one of those things is to get my team to prioritize it... to say that I'll make that time in case they don't have it. But unfortunately, my own time is about 5-10% of that 10%... (laugh)"* (Kim)

When asked what is conflicting:

> *"For me, it's the operative… meetings. I mean I have people on sick leave, people leaving so I need to recruit… I haven't been able to rinse my calendar…. BUT! I shouldn't say that because I have - I have a booking in my calendar every other Friday for innovation. [...] and I… in the first spot when we started this, I didn't have that time in my calendar and realized that i'll never make time for this… so now I have this booking in my calendar so no one can book meetings but I still use it to… keep up, in my backlog."* (Kim)

Managers seem to be worse at prioritizing the 10% initiative, and are hence more troubled by how freely the initiative is formulated. Interviewees in managerial positions are focused on making time for their team, and helping them use the initiative. However, they easily miss out on the innovation time themselves.

4.1.2 What Happens to My Idea?

Apart from scheduling, the initiative does not suggest how to capture ideas that are produced during the 10% time. When asked what feels hindering or supporting with regard to the 10% initiative, Robin again talked about the freedom related to the initiative:

> *"Right now it's not so much… we are very free but there's nothing, as I'm aware of, picking up those ideas... so the sounding board or someone you could talk to but it didn't really happen [when Robin demoed an idea]. People appreciated me showing what I had, but not really more than that..."* (Robin)

Lee specifically shared a desire to work on ideas with others in a collaborative effort, however was not sure about how the idea's journey would look in practice:

> *"I haven't gotten that far yet but I hope it would be a group of people with different roles that would work on it so we do not work on our own anymore."* (Lee)

> *"How do you think it is more beneficial to have team evaluations?"* (Interviewer)

> *"It is because... when you have some initial ideas, you get direct feedback and you kind of filter the bad ideas out directly and you can focus on the ideas that are better."* (Lee)

There is a wish for a structure that captures the ideas. Many interviewees share this wish as a practical lack that hinders the ideas from benefiting the organization. It also seems to be the case that on an individual level: carrying on with your ideas and staying motivated demands some kind of external encouragement. Some interviewees questioned this lack of structure:

> *"[...] I don't see how it can work right now. We have a board where we can put up our ideas and people can probably assign themselves if you create a card (which not everybody does) and the idea is that you are supposed to contact the person and you can continue together."* (Jordan)

> *"There is no process [...] But I think innovation activities have so far not been picked up and I think no great ideas have been missed due to that. I think… that ideas come up and do not get picked up."* (Ashley)

"And could I actually put it (my idea) into the 90% like bridging that gap - it is not obvious to me how to do that." (Robin)

Gene decided to use a proactive approach to spread the idea(s) that come up:

"I talked to my manager. To say ok, just as sort of a bouncing board. Because we are allowed to do almost everything we want [...] but I bounced the idea with my manager, just to avoid that someone else is working on the same thing or maybe synchronize (with them)." (Gene)

"What was the next step afterwards?" (Interviewer)

"I think in the first idea, then I talked to some other people... he (the manager) pointed me in one direction to go talk to some people, and that made me kind of skip or cancel that idea because that was already worked on before. And then the second idea was where my manager said that yeah, that we could… that was at least a new thing that has not been done before. So he said 'please pitch this in the next department meeting with around 100 people'." (Gene)

Robin shared feelings of disappointment after demoing an idea, but not getting sufficient feedback from peers:

"At the time I didn't think much about it, but I had hoped for more feedback. There was one question: 'can you do that?' but it will take time… it was some slight disappointment, but it will take time." (Robin)

Overall, the individuals seem to be confused by the lack of structure, and do not know how to bring their ideas forward. Just like the scheduling, the practical handling of the ideas is loosely defined.

4.1.3 Who Innovates?

The initiative is focused on everybody contributing by innovating 10% of their time. However, already in our first interview, this structure was brought up by Jordan, when asked about the way the organization has chosen to balance the initiative:

> *"[...] for example if a person has a big idea - 10% is not enough... would it be better that one person innovates and others do not? Some teams share but we do not. So there is a boundary that we experience but we were not told that there is a boundary."* (Jordan)

The loosely defined initiative brings concerns regarding the structure. Jordan questioned how the organization had chosen to balance it. Also Robin argued in favor of possibly letting some people stick to exploitative activities, as in their routines and daily tasks:

> *"It's also, for some people they feel more comfortable with doing things that are closer to home base... and I don't feel that you should stop that."* (Robin)

When asked about the idea of dividing innovation over the individuals in the team, Kelly noticed both upsides and downsides:

> *"It could be... it's very hard to get done I think.. But you need experimental people in the ordinary work as well, you know.. Hardest thing I think is to force people into this... some people don't want to do innovation, they don't see the point. Just to say you should do it, perhaps is a waste of time."* (Kelly)

Kelly acknowledged that some individuals in the organization are not really inclined towards innovation:

> *"...I think our team has been... everyone has been very happy about it, but I've seen other teams and individuals 'oh I don't really know what to do, i'll just read something' and then it's easy to go back to your ordinary work tasks."* (Kelly)

The idea of dividing the innovation within the team was also introduced to Gene:

> *"Yeah… Yeah… Of course, yeah... That's a nice thing as well, because otherwise it's sort of mandatory… Maybe it doesn't fit everyone."* (Gene)

When asked if there are any downsides, Gene seemed to see how a division could suit the organization, while not fully convinced:

> *"I mean, there will be people who don't want to spend this time... you can't force them anyhow... and forcing people to innovate can't be done. And maybe they will be*

negative and spread these negative thoughts [...] If that's not what you sign up for, let's not force them?" (Gene)

"You don't think you risk missing ideas?" (Interviewer)

"Yes, of course… But if they don't want to, let's not… but I think we should still try to persuade them..?" (Gene)

4.2 Exploration: a Break From Daily Routines - "Friday I'm in Love"

The second one of our main topics relates to how the individuals' felt about spending 10% of their time on innovation. The process of switching is in focus, including feelings and challenges that are related to this. Most of the interviewees enjoyed the initiative and to get to do something other than their ordinary job for part of their scheduled time. It was not seldom experienced as fulfilling, enjoyable and interesting. Some individuals felt grateful towards Innovate-Inc. for being given this opportunity within their employment.

4.2.1 Breaking Out of the Cage

Throughout the interviews, it became clear that many of the employees appreciate the 10% initiative. For example, when asked how they experience the initiative:

"I think it's good that they recognize this. I feel that the 10/90 ratio is good: you get things through the system but still get that investment in trying to go outside the box as you should be able to, and be completely free with innovation. So I think it's a good initiative but in the end it's gonna come back to the company itself: both with that your competence... matters, so that improves morale in the company, but also that it increases chances to get into new markets and how things work in the company." (Robin)

Since most of the employees allocate their 10% time on one day every two weeks (e.g., 'free Friday'), this time has become something they look forward to, while being engaged in their 90% core work:

“[...] it is a great feeling to have the idea and knowing that ‘within two weeks, I will get to work with it’.” (Sydney)

Sydney further specified how and why this 10% time creates a great feeling, and implicitly noted what the differences are in comparison to the regular work:

“[...] I can think, I can reflect. I also have time to walk around and engage in what people do and not run between meetings all the time… I can take time to walk around the floor.” (Sydney)

Aside from having these positive feelings when using their 10% time, many employees also referred to how it changes their energy levels at work, how they felt like being on vacation, in a gap where people can relieve stress and recharge their minds. Furthermore, having the green-light to take this time makes a significant difference in terms of they feel encouraged by the company:

“I get really positive and energetic from this activity, that we are allowed to do it, and are encouraged to do it. So I feel very energized and encouraged by it.” (Gene)

“It relieves some stress I would say… pause in everyday delivery. It’s a mini vacation. When you do work and go on education or training then you go away and your mind is somewhere totally else and you come back and your mind is fresh… then you’re really refreshed. So it’s like a mini-vacation and you get a boost out of it.” (Cory)

Lee also feels the possibility to break out of the normal role in the organization, when on innovation time. When asked how the self-image depends on the task:

“[...] because I kind of don't have a role when I’m working on the 10%, no one has. I think there will be in the future but right now I have every role in the 10% while in the 90% I have my role.” (Lee)

“So you can break out of your role?” (Interviewer)

“Definitely!” (Lee)

There is a good feeling connected to the innovation time also for Sydney. When asked about the role in the 10% time, Sydney replied with "...it's great" while laughing and smiling. After a clarifying question from the interviewer: "the 10%?", Sydney continued:

> *"Yes, it's great. and I mean… I… I sometimes cheat. I mean there are meetings with people that are not part of these 10% and sometimes people book me for these meetings. And I am not 100% formal and say 'no you cannot book me due to free Friday'. I am very keen on not booking my organization on free Fridays and I tell my sister organizations that they cannot… so it's not a lot but it happens that there are some meetings for me on free Fridays... so I'm not so strict. But looking at my calendar on Thursday evening and seeing I have a free Friday, it makes me really happy."* (Sydney)

Lee compared using these 10% for learning and innovation to being a student, and to starting at the company, emphasizing how it helps one to grow as a person, and how it allows one to have a long-term view when working. A long-term view that is mostly impossible to have in the 90% time since the daily tasks are closely linked to short-term goals:

> *"Good. It is definitely good. You learn more about yourself as well. Most people have worked like this while being students and when they first started working. It is more difficult and it is more rewarding as well."* (Lee)

> *"[...] I like focusing on something that is more long term, not just working on super short results all the time."* (Lee)

Shannon elaborated on how and why the 10% functions as a relief from the burden of daily activities. For Shannon, being a product manager means to deliver short-term oriented results, holding team members accountable for their deliveries, and also to deal with expectations from other company members:

> *"It's quite a relief actually to take off the product manager hat on the free Fridays because I don't have any expectations of making sure that the teams deliver what they should. I can be more of a team member than a project manager which is good and it helps very much with the framework, the boundaries and disconnecting it from the daily work. […] it feels like, even though it can be defined as innovation and*

creativity, it still feels like it's part of everyday work and its nice to switch hats and have less expectations on that it should actually deliver results." (Shannon)

4.2.1.1 Managers Letting Go of Themselves

Managers also experience good feelings from breaking their routines. One of the interviewees, who occupies a managerial position, highlighted how this 10% time helps to drop the burden of being a manager, and how it changes the prevalent organizational hierarchy:

> *"... I feel more relieved… I think the bad part about being a manager is that everyone sees you as a manager. And here, it is like 'no I am not a manager, I am at the same level as you'."* (Kim)

For Kim, this relief is also strongly connected to the work activities in the 10%, that are on the one hand not tied to any deadlines, and on the other usually not possible to tackle in the 90% work:

> *"Being a manager, I am always like 'ok, let me do the things I need to do'… the other things are more like things I want to do and be like… relaxed is the wrong word because I can be quite relaxed as a manager as well, but you do not have any deadlines… In my role as a manager I always have deadlines."* (Kim)

For one manager, breaking out of the normal managerial role means to go back to being an engineer. As an engineer, the interviewee can now operate more practically again, and try out new things or experiment with ideas. All these exploratory activities are in stark contrast to the interviewee's usual daily administrative tasks, respectively the duties of being a leader (or 'coach' and 'mentor'). The exploratory activities furthermore seem to be in line with the person's natural interests:

> *"I'm not doing that much engineering myself anymore because I mostly… I'm not into any project. So I think it's… I will say it's fun because I learn to work on, and try out new things. I'm a very creative person, and practical… so I love doing things with my hands. So joy, joy and fun."* (Ray)

"How does it feel to shift?" (Interviewer)

> *"I think it's… it's something I'm looking forward to very much. And it's a little bit that I can also be involved in those projects' hands on. Otherwise, I'm more of a coach and a mentor… and now I can try out things the way I can try it out."* (Ray)

Beyond that, Ray voiced how the 90% role is more consultative, as in asking the right questions to help others to come up with solutions. In contrast to the 90%, the 10% demand to come up with your own solutions, which is something the interviewee values:

> *"I see it as an opportunity… Normally on my 90% I don't work so much with solutions; I can come with suggestions but normally I listen to others and if they want my opinion, I can give it to them but if they have a problem, I don't have the solutions. I'm not that into the problem… but I can help them by asking the right questions. So they realize how they can solve their problems. Now I can try it for myself a bit more. In this 10% you will see me with a screwdriver, definitely."* (Ray)

Overall, the interviewees shared that there are good feelings connected to the innovation time within the organization. Not having expectations or predetermined shoes to fill gives the employees a freedom and provides a playful room which is much appreciated within the organization. Morale is thought to be improved in the organization, a manager feels relieved by not being seen as a manager for a moment, and individuals look forward to their free Fridays, when they get to work on their own project in their own way.

4.2.2 Switching Between Roles: the Burden of Wearing (too) Many Hats

A recurring experience in the interviews is perceiving the 10% time as very enjoyable, however linking it to some difficulties in switching between roles. The switching between tasks is seen as time loss, and working on the 10% initiative in short time intervals is viewed as difficult and/or inefficient. When asked about changing the role for innovation time, Jordan tied the answer to how the structure differs between the 90% time and the 10% time, and admitted that there are struggles:

"We are trying this a little bit, so in the team we chose one day every two weeks, Wednesday, when we want to innovate. But it's mostly hard to change the focus. because we plan backlogs for two weeks, we have a plan for what to do. When you're supposed to innovate you're still thinking about these plans rather than innovate." (Jordan)

Kim outlined why switching focus from 90% to 10% is difficult:

"I need to… decide myself that I shouldn't focus on the normal work and that I should do something else. And that's hard." (Kim)

"Hard to switch focus?" (Interviewer)

"Yes. To leave those other tasks, I mean I have these other things that I need to finish up. And to say that, I just need to leave this now. It's like going on vacation… or on the weekend – it's like closing my brain down Friday night, and then I start it up Monday morning… but it's hard to do so for innovation." (Kim)

Another manager, Cory, not only referred to this problem as a problem of context switching, but also outlined the difficulties of squeezing 100% workload into 90%:

"So there is context switching of course. So sometimes you want to finish something and then something pops up and then you have to switch off and do it… so your 90% is no longer your 100% so you have to switch your reality to this so that you don't cheat." (Cory)

This 'context switching' seems to be challenging for various reasons, one of them concerns having a 'business mindset' as in putting a stronger emphasis on daily operations to deliver results:

"I don't think it's fair to say that we have a free Friday, we will not do any other work because you also have to have a business mindset… but the challenge is to know when that is the right thing to do. Because in an organization that has a lot to do, you can basically say that any time." (Sydney)

When asked about how the initiative easily being down prioritized made them feel, Ashley, as part of the management team, shared contradicting feelings:

"Yes, I know a lot of people get stressed about it 'we don't do the innovation that we said we would do'.. in my dream world, this would be a natural part of the work. It's in your work to look outside, to workshop… in everyone's work. That we don't need a 10% initiative. That is not where we are so I think we need to explore and test different methods, and I think it's the right way to try one day with the whole organization one day every other week or so." (Ashley)

"Where does the stress come from? What's the root of it for you and your team?" (Interviewer)

"I think it's the feeling that I don't get the time..." (Ashley)

"For yourself as sadness or as missing an obligation?" (Interviewer)

"No, it's not a big stress. I think, if you go to the follow-up on Friday and say I didn't have time, of course that's a negative feeling and when you have negative feelings every Friday morning its a bad thing, you should have good feelings connected to this... so a general bad feeling." (Ashley)

"So sad?" (Interviewer)

"naae…" (Ashley)

"Guilty?" (Interviewer)

"Yes, pretty much." (Ashley)

Ashley seems to have a hard time unraveling what feelings are actually connected to not being able to prioritize the initiative. When summing up the discussion, Ashley was asked how the initiative could be improved:

"... hmm, it is a lot about the timing and when, when we should do this.. emm.. but I… in one way I think that's.. it can be improved but that problem will never be solved. I mean, there will always be stress, and important things that I think should be prioritized on that day. Of course there is a limit, you should not weigh that all daily operation practices have a higher priority but if there are 100 customers waiting for

your release, it's better to prioritize that than do innovation… even if you said you would. I think." (Ashley)

The initiative seems to impose some pressure on the employees. Some interviewees experience stress from switching roles, and this seems to be more common on management level. The individuals in direct contact with clients seem to have a harder time switching into innovation-time while the engineers working on projects do not seem to have the same issues. Some of the interviewees believe that this is related to their role in the company, and to personality traits. Even though almost all interviews have witnessed teammates or other colleagues get stressed about it, very few admitted to feeling this stress themselves:

"I don't feel it. I guess it depends on the workload when you do it. In other teams, I have seen people say 'I don't have time, I'll do it another day'. One issue is when you are like 'oh, I almost solved a problem', but then you can't continue in the morning. That's always the issue of switching tasks, the more you switch tasks the more you lose. Before I moved to this department, we had free Fridays so every other Friday you were free to do whatever you wanted. But sometimes, it was hard when it had been ten days." (Kelly)

Jordan, who is a team leader, is one of few who shared feelings of stress when talking about balancing the 90% with the 10%. When asked about feeling safer in the 90% time:

"It can be vice versa because sometimes we have too much to do in the 90%." (Jordan)

"Can it be stressful?" (Interviewer)

"It can be stressful since we know that we have so much to do… Even though these 10% are included in time plans etc. and we should not worry about it. But it can still be stressful to change the focus and leave your project but I think it varies between individuals. Some people in my team don't really care." (Jordan)

When asked in case there was more pressure on Jordan as a team leader:

"Yes, because I have to force people to spend 10% of their time on innovation. Some feel that their daily work is more important and I need to remind them of innovation day." (Jordan)

While the initiative is appreciated by individuals, there are also feelings of stress and frustration connected to it. Even though there are no expectations formulated, the employees seem to feel obliged to allocate 10% to innovation, even when it imposes stress rather than good feelings. Some individuals have a hard time placing the feeling towards the lost innovation time, and others do not think much about having to reschedule.

4.2.2.1 Leading by Example and Protecting the Initiative

There seems to be an extra responsibility for the initiative experienced in management positions.

"So, to make it work it's important not just to give the calendar time but also to show that you do it yourself. And engage in it. [...] I think you have to lead by example. We all have these 10% so there's always the opportunity to say that today, I will not do project work because the backlog always asks you to do. But if you see managers do it, that shows you that it's not just granted, but also expected that you take 10%." (Sydney)

Sydney feels responsible for showing the team that the initiative is real and should be prioritized. When asked about whether being a leader adds a dimension to the initiative, Sydney, who recurrently emphasized leading by example, agreed:

"I think the responsibility that I have is to really… make sure that this is not something that is good in theory and that you can interview me about it and I'll tell you how it should work and not how it really works... so I need to be really close to the floor and have the ear to… you know, the train. I have to make sure it actually happens and that the company creates the… yes, allows it to happen" (Sydney)

"But also living it?" (Interviewer)

"Yes, living it but also finding the balance… I mean, we want people to grow and learn but we ultimately want the outcome to grow for our business. We haven't really started to follow up the outcome. And that's something that we need to do." (Sydney)

Ray outlined how being a manager and leader exponentiates the responsibility to use this initiative, to provide an example for others and to not just be a 'boss':

"I want to be a leader; I don't want to be a boss. And if I say this is important for all of us to do, then I need to do it too. It's very important that you live like you learn, as a leader but also of course as an employee. Otherwise, I think it's bad for the culture, and you're not a leader you're a boss – saying you should do this, but I don't do it…" (Ray)

Another manager, Cory, added that it is crucial to use the 10% to urge especially those employees who shy aways from using their time to explore:

"Is it more important that subordinates do it than you do it? Is it important to send a signal to them?" (Interviewer)

"Yes. It is important for the managers to do it so that the employees do it. Especially for those that don't really do it. Like I said, those that spend 50% are not a problem but there are those that are not in their comfort zone doing it… and then we as managers need to show it." (Cory)

Aside from having the responsibility of being role models, managers also voiced the need to protect the initiative. They not only emphasized how important it is to put efforts into helping their subordinates using these 10%, but also:

"It has been very important to us to protect those 10%. That's very important. Because if you say 'we will all have fun on 10% people are like ok, but where do I find that 10%', what should I do less? So important has been to find those 10%." (Ray)

"Please elaborate. What do you mean by 'protect the initiative'…?" (Interviewer)

"I'm more interested in protecting this 10% than protecting the 90%. So I think if anyone is using 12 or 13% that's better than half the group using 5%. So I think it's very important to push or enable people to use the 10%." (Ray)

In case an employee misses out on, for example a “free Friday”, Cory stated the importance of managers to make sure they replace that day with another one.

> *“Every second Friday people put aside the project work for this. Could be people cheating and sometimes things get in the way – that’s fine and we give them another day… so that means they still take the 10%, just a different day.”* (Cory)

Ray stressed how helping employees figuring out how they can find time to spend the 10% is yet another essential leadership task:

> *“I think we have worked with this for a short time and somehow, I put a lot of effort into helping people reach those 10%. Like, what can you do less and… to get this 10% […] and as a leader I need to help everyone maybe work a little smarter, so maybe it’s just 3 hours we need to put to someone else […] and solve that puzzle.”* (Ray)

Managers seem to experience a responsibility to make sure that their subordinates actually take the 10% initiative seriously and invest their time as planned. This adds a dimension to the initiative for managers and team leaders, who are at the same time supposed to contribute to the initiative on an individual level. At the same time, as mentioned above, managers are often scheduled for meetings and have to turn to other events that interfere with their innovation time. Interviewee 8 commented on the interrupted innovation time:

> *“... I think that these deviations… they are within what I think is ok. I mean, we drive business and helping customers is what pays our salaries. We cannot be that black and white but we have to accept these small things.”* (Sydney)

Overall, the balance between the 90% project work time and the 10% innovation time is tricky for many of the interviewees. There are no clear structures, which is seen both as an advantage and as a disadvantage.

Kim, who often uses the 10% time for ordinary work, has mostly bad feelings from missing out on the 10% time:

> *“As long as no one asks, I don't feel bad. But now that I sit here, and when someone asks - it's not a good feeling.”*(Kim)

"Can you specify?" (Interviewer)

"I'm mostly disappointed. I am allowed to take this time, I should take it but i'm disappointed because I don't do it." (Kim)

"So… role-model, team.. something like that?" (Interviewer)

"Yes, also. But it's also myself - it's both parts. I'm disappointed that I can't be a role model, and I'm disappointed that I don't prioritize it for myself." (Kim)

Kim feels a disappointment from not taking the 10% time to innovate: both because there is an expectation from the organization to use it, and because there seem to be good feelings connected with the time that is in fact used for innovation. As Kim misses out on these good feelings when not using the time, there is disappointment. Also, constantly reminding the team to use the innovation time but not using it themself seems to give a feeling of not being a good role model.

4.3 Where do I fit in? - "Of Course I'm a Creative Person"

Our third and last topic relates to roles and identity. Individuals at Innovate-Inc. oftentimes seemed to identify with the creative culture in the industry and in the organization, however many of the interviewees could see a value of not "pushing" innovation on every employee.

4.3.1 "Innovate-Inc:ers are Innovative"

When asked if they perceive themselves as innovative individuals, almost all interviewees said yes. Even those in roles that are not focused on contributing with new ideas perceive themselves as innovative, while performing tasks in their 10% time that are close to their 90% responsibilities. What is recurrent in the conversations to follow is the view of Innovate-Inc as a forward thinking organization hiring innovative individuals. When asked about company culture:

> *"I think [Innovate-Inc] is… I'm quite new here but it's a company that has innovation in its culture and we're good at it. Especially at [Lee's department] were really trying to innovate. Especially, in those 10% there are less control or structure while in 90% there are workflows…"* (Lee)

When asked about how many of the rest of the people in the team (around 20 people) are focused on exploratory work rather than refinements, Lee continued:

> *"I think most people would like to have innovative work to some degree. I think that kind of fits the profile of people they are looking for: it fits [Innovate-Inc's] profile so I think they mainly hire people who are innovative."* (Lee)

Ashley was very positive towards the initiative throughout the interview. When asked whether drawn to innovation personally:

> *"I'm very positive and engaged. I think this is a great initiative. As I said, because of the two reasons, both personal development and I think it's necessary for the company to survive."* (Ashley)

Then, when asked how the 10% time affects the role, and what the time is in practice used for, Ashley continued:

> *"Yes, for me I think it's less than most roles. Umm… it's more like sometimes I'm not sure 'should i count this as innovation or should i count this as normal work?' like doing customer or competitor research… that I also need in my normal work. But I can also call it innovation, because it opens up my mind and I can think in steps from it. So for me it's like I don't know if it's 90 or 10% but I think in some roles it's more clear…"* (Ashley)

When the interviewer clarified the question regarding whether the role changes when focusing on innovation:

> *"No, I don't think so. I think it extends. So far, what I have spent the time on, it extends the role that I'm doing and I have more time to look at competitors, similar technologies, looking more into technologies that I don't fully understand, having more time to interact with others about long-term ideas and challenges… So for me, I*

don't experience a change and that's what I also meant that my role does not change as much." (Ashley)

In another part of the conversation, talking about switching roles, Ashley shared:

> *"... I think the 10% improves my 90% and if I had spent 100% on my 90% I would have probably spent it more on documentation, requirements… hands on-stuff. […] and this is more the machine part of this role…"* (Ashley)
>
> *"So if you didn't have the 10% initiative, would you not do these things?"* (Interviewer)
>
> *"... I guess less at least. Because there's things I see and hear that I get interested in. I put them on my innovation-list and make time for them. The list would not be worked on as much otherwise."* (Ashley)

Ashley seems to focus the innovation time on work tasks that would be included in the 90% work. The 10% is seen as a bit of slack in the schedule, to actually have time to improve the rest of the 90%. Still, Ashley sees this work as innovative. Also Shannon, who outlines feelings of being overwhelmed and ultimately frustrated by the challenges to switch, has chosen to focus on tasks that could be seen as part of the 90% work:

> *"[…] I used to think of new ideas, new products… and I'm not the right person in those areas because I don't have the technical expertise and not very deep technical interest either… so for me it's been challenging […] so people said 'you can work on innovative ways of working'... I was like 'yeah'."* (Shannon)
>
> *"How did it make you feel?"* (Interviewer)
>
> *"It was really tricky to… have… a feeling that I was expected to be innovative but I didn't feel like it. […] It was very frustrating in the beginning because I had an expectation on myself that I should join a team of developers and they discuss and I'm like …'how can I contribute to this, what can I do?' Because my daily work is to set up structures to make sure we can deliver on time… but the 10% is about not having that."* (Shannon)

Innovate-Inc. is seen as an innovative company, and the interviewees define themselves as innovative individuals. Putting time on things such as competitor analysis and streamlining the operations is by some viewed as innovation, even though these tasks would be included in their 90% work in case they had time for it.

4.4 Chapter Summary

Throughout this section, we have presented our findings. The findings have been focused on three main topics related to the structure of the initiative; how the switching of focus affects individuals; and roles/identification. The interviewees' experiences of course differ, but some themes occur rather commonly, including the paradox of flexibility and its impact on innovation; joyful feelings combined with stress and pressure from having to choose between the daily work tasks and innovation time; role taking and identifying with the organization or the expectations; and getting attached to your ideas and having a hard time letting it go.

5 Discussion

In the following section, our empirical findings will be discussed and connected to previous research. The discussion will revolve around our three main topics, using examples from section 4, in the light of our research question: “How do individual employees experience the tensions when balancing explorative and exploitative work?”. In the section to follow, we interpret the 10% innovation-initiative as exploratory work, in line with the definitions by March (1991). The remaining 90% of the individuals’ work time is hence viewed as exploitative work. Our main findings are summarized and listed below:

- A lack of structure imposes difficulties for individuals when working on the 10% initiative, in making time for it as well as getting started
- Individuals enjoy switching to a more creative role and getting a break from their routines, however, the switching also imposes difficulties
- Managers seem to have a harder time making time for the 10% initiative, whilst also feeling a pressure to be role models and to protect the initiative
- Some individuals may take on roles that do not suit them, through identifying with the organization

5.1 How to Structure for Exploration?

Our first discussion section revolves around the structure of the initiative, as well as the lack of clarity regarding how individual ideas get dealt with inside the organization. All employees within Innovate-Inc were told at the end of 2021, respectively in the beginning of 2022 that from there on, they had to split their 100% time into a new 90% / 10% set-up. While the 90% still ought to be used for activities to keep the daily business going, as in exploitation, the idea behind the 10% is to use this amount of the total time for learning and innovation, as in exploration. However, the first challenge for many of the employees lies in the fact that they were only told that they have to spend this 10% of their time, but not exactly how they should implement them. Having that maximum amount of freedom and flexibility seemed to be, what we called, a ‘messy blessing’ for most of the employees. Messy, since they realized that having an unstructured approach based on total flexibility to implement

these 10% somewhat appeared to be counterproductive. This is why they consulted each other and created, for example, the so-called 'free Fridays' where all team members spend their 10% time on the same day.

While the idea of individuals making their own decisions on when to spend their time on exploration is based on contextual ambidexterity (Gibson & Birkinshaw, 2004), it raises the question of how useful a high degree of freedom is. Ajayi and colleagues (2017) argued that flexible and organic organizational structures support individuals in being ambidextrous. These organic structures reduce the rules and regulations for employees and allow them to make autonomous decisions (Ajayi et al., 2017). We found that this structure also prevails at Innovate-Inc. Nevertheless, while individuals embraced this freedom, they also created more structure, rules, and guidance for themselves. More specifically, they tried to align their 10% time with their team members, and even with other teams and departments, in order to collaborate more and to increase the likelihood of producing ideas from exploring. Overall, we interpret that particular process to be a reaction to the fact that these 10% should get the same prioritization as the 90%. Since their normal work days are structured, e.g. by having meetings or deadlines, individuals decided to bring structure into this initiative, to avoid that the 90% time would be seen as more prioritized and hence take over. To use these 10% more effectively and therefore grant it the necessary priority, the majority of individuals decided to spend a whole day - a 'free Friday' - once every two weeks on exploration. This finding supports a "temporal cycling between long periods of exploitation and short bursts of exploration", and its ascribed attributes of being both practical and logical (Gupta et al., 2006, p.698).

Ironically and notwithstanding these individual attempts to create more alignment between each other,cto spend their time on exploration together, we identified how important it is for individuals to get feedback on their ideas. However, at the same time, it could be recognized that it is unclear to individuals which people would evaluate their ideas, as well as how and where these ideas are specifically discussed. Recalling the definition of exploration, as the experimentation with new alternatives and the creation of new knowledge, magnifies how crucial feedback and evaluation processes are (Baum et al., 2000; March, 1991). As of now, there seems to be confusion regarding these steps among employees. We see two potential major drawbacks that may result from that:

- Firstly, some employees already voiced their frustration or even sadness about the fact that their individual and potentially fruitful ideas were not discussed by other group or organizational members, despite sharing them on a physical board or putting them on a digital platform. This implies a potential risk because employees could get dissatisfied when spending their 10% time on exploring, however, this does not occur due to the mere fact that they have to switch into a different role when exploring (see Bidmon & Boe-Lillegraven, 2020).
- Secondly, as the role of individuals to be ambidextrous has been underlined as a key aspect for organizational ambidexterity (e.g., Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2009; Bonesso et al., 2014), it is doubtful how organizations can ultimately benefit from ambidextrous individuals - especially from exploration -, if their ideas are not discussed on a 'bigger stage'. When reconsidering that individual ambidexterity draws on the idea that individuals make their own decisions on how to allocate their time between exploration and exploitation (Gibson & Birkinshaw, 2004), one central shortcoming of this approach becomes evident (e.g., Kauppila, 2010; O'Reilly & Tushman, 2013). This concerns the underlying simplified assumption of contextual ambidexterity that individuals produce exploratory knowledge somewhere, which organizations then selectively adapt to their advantages (Kauppila, 2010). Based on our findings, we see a similar issue at Innovate-Inc., since individual exploratory learnings or ideas do no enter a clear process, which makes it doubtful how the organization can ultimately use ambidextrous individuals to their advantage (Mom et al., 2019; Prieto-Pastor & Martin-Perez, 2015).

Therefore, setting up a more nuanced process and a clearer structure could be beneficial for individuals working ambidextrously, hence contributing to their organization being ambidextrous (Gibson & Birkinshaw, 2004; Prieto-Pastor & Martin-Perez, 2015).

Our findings related to the structure of the initiative also raised the question of how to reconcile the conflicting demands of exploration and exploitation on the individual level. The initiative clearly states that all employees have to use 10% of their time for exploration regardless of their roles. This requires every individual to switch from exploitation to exploration on one's own terms. However, our findings indicate that not everyone is keen on spending that amount of time on something that is not related to their core tasks (see further discussion on this in section 5.4). While research shows that a simultaneous approach to

ambidexterity on the individual level is rather impossible because exploration and exploitation require two different modes of human attention (Laureiro-Martinez et al., 2015), that approach could be possible on a team/unit level (Bledow et al., 2009).

In practice, this would mean that those individuals who enjoy spending 10% of their time on exploration, respectively those who would prefer to spend more than 10% of their time on it, would continue to switch activities (Kauppila, 2010). In contrast, those employees who prefer to engage solely in exploitative activities would stick to these tasks. A given team or unit which would adopt such an approach would therefore be structurally ambidextrous (O'Reilly & Tushman, 2008). Thus, considering that, we would refer to this scenario as ambidextrous teams (team ambidexterity) instead of ambidextrous individuals (Andriopoulos and Lewis, 2009; 2010; Bledow et al., 2009). Rather than individuals deciding how to divide their time between exploration and exploitation (Gibson & Birkinshaw, 2004), they would need to choose to engage in either exploratory or exploitative activities based on their personal preferences (Caniëls & Veld, 2019).

5.2 Switching Roles: The Joyful Part

What got evident from our findings is the enjoyment and related positive feelings that individuals get from spending their 10% time on exploration. We believe this is the case for several reasons: first, on a more general level, an individual's regular daily business activities are oftentimes tied to meetings, strict deadlines, and short-term results. Dealing with customer demands, refining products and services, and looking for local improvements, are all exploitative tasks that need to be done in a timely manner. Exploratory activities, on the contrary, are more long-term oriented and risky, making their potential results uncertain (Baum et al., 2000; Benner & Tushman, 2003). Innovate-Inc.'s employees were told that they do not need to produce any results since they just got started with the initiative. Therefore, employees neither operate under time pressure nor are they pressured to produce any outcomes resulting from their exploratory activities. Hence, they enjoy the freedom of experimenting, playing with new ideas, prototyping, or to put it another way: of exploring new possibilities (Baum et al., 2000; March, 1991).

Furthermore, our interviewees embraced changing their roles when switching from ordinary work tasks to exploratory activities. Birkinshaw and Gibson (2004, p.49) label this characteristic as being “comfortable wearing more than hat”, while Floyd and Lane (2000) refer to it as catering to different and possibly conflicting roles. As we gained data from both employees in managerial positions and employees without managerial responsibilities, we also realized that even though they shared positive feelings towards their new exploratory roles, differences between the two groups of employees seem to exist. A more specific discussion regarding managers will follow in section 5.2.1. Individuals from both groups, however, felt energized from using 10% of their time, and further relieved to engage in things they rather want to do, than have to do. It again exemplifies the contrast between what is required of them in their 90% work roles (exploitation) and the freedom they have in their 10% (exploratory) roles. Furthermore, exploitative roles reflect the regular work roles of individuals, meaning that these are connected to various but clear responsibilities, rules, and tasks, while also requiring specific skills (March, 1994).

In terms of how individuals transition from these exploitative roles to exploratory roles and vice versa, we found elements of role segmentation as well as role integration (Tempelaar & Rosenkranz, 2019). Individuals enjoy switching to exploratory roles because it allows them to ‘break out’ of their normal ‘work cage’. However, our data showed that individuals clearly separate these roles from another, as they mentioned that they do not have any roles in the 10%, and how they can put aside their ‘regular work hats’. These findings suggest that employees rather operate as role segmenters through the creation of nonoverlapping role domains (Edwards & Rothbard, 2000). Building distinctive exploratory roles allows individuals to focus on different demands singularly, enables them to protect themselves against interruptions from exploitative duties, and thus helps them to avoid role conflict (Tempelaar & Rosenkranz, 2019). Notwithstanding these signs of role segmentation, our data did neither indicate that individuals neglect “the merits of different knowledge pools”, nor that they show signs of “silo thinking within role domains” (Tempelaar & Rosenkranz, 2019, p.1532). Both arguments indicate that employees also feature elements of role integration. Moreover, Tempelaar & Rosenkranz (2019) identified role integration as sufficient for individual ambidexterity, and also found that role segmenters appear to be rather conflicted by diverging demands of exploration and exploitation. We propose a contrary view and suggest that role segmentation could also be a suitable way for individuals to work

ambidextrously. Through segmentation, individuals can disconnect from exploitative demands which are inherently results-, as well as short-term oriented (March, 1991). By embracing their exploratory roles, they enjoy having the freedom of experimenting, and generating ideas, while not having the duty to deliver results frequently (March, 1991).

5.2.1 Managers: The Joyful Part of Switching

As we gained data from both employees in managerial positions, as well as employees without managerial responsibilities, we also realized that even though they shared positive feelings towards their new exploratory roles, differences between the two groups of employees seem to exist (Tarba et al., 2020). Our findings show how managers are different from their subordinates in the sense that they can let go of their managerial responsibilities when exploring. It allows them to occupy the same hierarchical levels as their subordinates, as the 10% initiative poses the same requirements for all organizational members regardless of their job titles, and thus independent of their places in the internal hierarchy.

Furthermore, switching to exploration enables managers to become more geared towards technical challenges again, through being more 'hands-on' or practically oriented. In this new context, they can contribute with their own ideas and prototype again, all of which displays a strong contrast to their regular demands and baseline behavior, of holding subordinates accountable for their work, and making sure that they deliver results on time (Keller & Weibler, 2015). Through engaging in exploratory activities, managers can renew their knowledge, expertise, and skills, e.g., to make themselves more familiar with new technologies (Mom et al., 2019). Not only do our findings indicate that managers embrace switching to exploration, they also highlight that these individuals embody another key ambidextrous behavior (Birkinshaw & Gibson, 2004). In particular, using 10% for exploration corresponds to managers putting a stronger emphasis on cooperation, and a proactive seeking to combine their efforts with others (Birkinshaw & Gibson, 2004). Overall, these activities contribute to managers enjoying switching to exploration, while it also helps them to relieve stress. Such findings support what Zhang, Wei and Van Horne (2019) propose concerning how ambidextrous behaviors might support individuals to handle work stress better.

5.3 Switching Roles: The Tricky Part

Notwithstanding the positive implications that switching from exploitative roles to exploratory roles has for individuals, our findings nevertheless point to several inherent difficulties related to switching roles. One difficulty is related to the different cognitive demands that exploration and exploitation pose (Laureiro-Martinez et al., 2015). Our interviewees stated that they need a certain ‘warm-up’ time to switch mindsets. More precisely, this circumstance stems from the fact that it is significantly more challenging for them to just put their normal work obligations aside, to then follow up with ‘innovation time’ (Tempelaar & Rosenkranz, 2019). As mentioned before, exploitative tasks imply short-term results tied to clear agendas and strict timelines. However, the initiative urges employees to manage their normal work with 10% less of their total working hours. Furthermore, as exploration demands individuals to produce new knowledge (Baum et al., 2000; March, 1991), they inevitably have to engage in divergent thinking (Cropley, 2006). Overall, throughout our findings this was perceived as being cognitively straining, stressful and frustrating at times (Keller & Weibler, 2015; Sok, Sok & De Luca, 2016). These insights provide further evidence, along with adding to the findings of both Keller and Weibler (2015) and Laureiro-Martínez et al. (2015) since our data does not solely include managers, but also individuals without managerial roles.

Our results also indicate why switching to exploratory roles could become a potential issue for individuals going forward. While this issue roots in the specific activities that exploration revolves around (Birkinshaw & Gibson, 2004; March, 1991), it is however not directly related to carrying out these activities (see Keller & Weibler, 2015). Rather, this could be attributed to the fact that individuals 'fear' the state of not having any more ideas or not being able to innovate. Such a scenario would furthermore mean that they could hardly contribute to exploration, which potentially leaves them choiceless other than picking the “familiar option” (Laureiro-Martínez et al., 2015, p.326) of exploitation. We interpret these concerns of individuals as feelings of fear, as in the fear of a potential inability to cater to their exploratory roles (e.g., Birkinshaw & Gibson, 2004; Mom et al., 2009). While we argue that this particular issue is related to difficulties of switching in a broader sense, we nevertheless interpret it more as an internal resistance, or barrier, to switching from exploitation to exploration (Bidmon & Boe-Lillegraven, 2020; Tempelaar & Rosenkranz, 2019). We thereby add to existing studies (e.g., Bidmon & Boe-Lillegraven, 2020; Rapp, Bachrach, Flaherty,

Hughes, Sharma & Voorhees, 2017; Sok et al., 2016; Tempelaar & Rosenkranz, 2019) by showing how a 'fear to explore' could pose a barrier to, or make individuals resist to switch from exploitation to exploration.

5.3.1 Managers: The Tricky Part of Switching

In this subsection, we will refer to our findings from 4.1.1.1 'Managers Missing Out', 4.2.1.1 'Managers Letting Go of Themselves', and 4.2.2.1 'Leading by Example and Protecting the Initiative'. Our data showed how managers, even though enjoying exploration (see 5.2.1 "Managers: The Joyful Part of Switching"), also have to fulfill extra responsibilities when exploring.

One of these responsibilities concerns their self-imposed quest to act as 'role models', when switching to exploratory activities. When looking at this insight through the lens of role transition, managers seem to prefer role integration over role segmentation (Tempelaar & Rosenkranz, 2019). Individuals who seek role integration tend to blur roles, resulting in congruence between actions from several role identities due to the active overlapping of role aspects (Edwards & Rothbard, 2000). Managers specifically emphasized why using their 10% time is not only important for themselves but also to send positive signals to their subordinates, making sure they prioritize exploration (10% time) as much as exploitation (90% time). The aforementioned illustrates, on the one hand, the sense of responsibility that arises from the managerial position and, on the other, the desire for managers to be 'role models'. Managers, therefore, integrated their managerial, hence exploitative, roles with their exploratory roles. Furthermore, we argue that switching to exploration, to a certain degree, exponentiated managers' managerial responsibilities, as well as the importance for them to act as 'role models'. Ironically, our findings show a contrast to the above discussion. In the section 'Managers Letting Go of Themselves' (see 4.2.1.1), managers talk about how they enjoy being on the same level as their subordinates and letting go of their managerial roles.

As outlined, managers want to set a good example by spending time on exploration during the 10%, therefore showing their subordinates that they prioritize it. However, at the same time, managers also miss out on these 10% (see 4.1.1.1 'Managers Missing Out'), or rather spend significantly less of their time on exploration, which seems to be paradoxical.

The second extra responsibility that managers bear resulting from the initiative, stems from their desire to protect it by making sure their subordinates use 10% of their time for exploration. Managers emphasized such challenges as significantly more important than themselves engaging in exploratory activities. Aside from managers operating ambidextrous themselves (e.g., Bonesso et al., 2014; Keller & Weibler, 2015; Tushman et al., 2011), it could be even more crucial for them to support their subordinates' ambidextrous work, through the use of managerial or leadership skills. Similar to the structural approach to ambidexterity on the organizational level, which requires managers to reconcile tensions and to create alignment between separate exploitative and exploratory units (O'Reilly & Tushman, 2011; O'Reilly et al., 2009; Smith & Tushman, 2005), managers may also have to solve similar issues to facilitate individual ambidexterity.

Overall, based on the aforementioned sections, aside from existing studies that highlight how managers reconcile the conflicting demands of exploration and exploitation (e.g., Keller & Weibler, 2015; Laureiro-Martínez et al., 2015), or how they contribute dually through acting ambidextrously (e.g., Mom et al., 2019), they may also need to act as 'role models' and 'protectors', when exploring.

5.4 Am I an Explorer?

Do role-taking and identity have an impact on how individuals view the 10% initiative? None of the interviewees share negative feelings toward the initiative as a concept. In line with the reasoning of Tempelaar & Rosenkranz (2019), this could depend on the organizational context that the individuals find themselves in and how they identify through the organization and their roles within it. Floyd & Lane (2000) argue that the roles assigned from the organization influence the individual's identities, which means that the initiative, and Innovate-Inc.'s image, may be a reason for why all interviewees claim to enjoy the innovation time. Innovate-Inc. is perceived as an organization that hires top employees with innovative minds, which may affect the employees' self-images by making them view themselves as innovative, and as engaging in innovative tasks (Turner, 1990). As previously mentioned, we view the 10% initiative as being meant for exploratory work. Keeping March's (1991) definitions of exploration and exploitation in mind, we find it interesting how tasks that can be argued for being purely exploitative, and that, according to the interviewees themselves,

are close to or even equal to their normal work tasks, are sometimes considered to be part of the 10% innovation initiative. One example is Ashley's choice to put the 10% time on work tasks which, in case there was no 10% initiative, would still have been part of the job. The 10% rather functioned as 'slack time' for tasks that were often down-prioritized and which were focused on making improvements for the 90% time. Even though Ashley considered these tasks innovative in an incremental sense: as finding more efficient solutions, they did not differ much from the exploitative work that is performed in the 90% time (see 4.3.1 "Innovate-Inc:ers are Innovative"). Ashley shared with us that these tasks were closely related to the 90% role's responsibilities, and that in case there had been enough time, the tasks would be performed within the normal work even in case there had been no 10% initiative. In line with the findings of Bidmon & Boe-Lillegraven (2020), the fact that some individuals stick to tasks close to their 90% tasks in the 10% time may be due to a resistance, conscious or not, to switch, in order to avoid uncomfortable feelings such as stress. Even though the study by Bidmon & Boe-Lillegraven (2020) was focused on top-down imposed switches, we believe that the feelings of stress from switching are present also in the setting of our study. These feelings could also explain why many of the interviewees prefer longer periods of innovation time over briefer periods, and hence scheduled the free Fridays every two weeks.

Rapp et al. (2017) argue that it is unlikely that all individuals manage the tensions from ambidextrous work equally well. This is in line with some of our results, indicating that individuals have different responses to the different demands. Some individuals within Innovate-Inc. seem to integrate the 10% and the 90% roles quite well (Tempelaar & Rosenkranz, 2019), by viewing the 10% time as an extension of the 90% time. However, whether that depends on how they handle the tensions from multiple demands, or rather on what they choose to focus their innovation time on, can be questioned. If it is the case that the tasks performed in their innovation time are closely related to the daily, exploitative work, it would not be correct to refer to these individuals as role integrators (Tempelaar & Rosenkranz, 2019), but rather to question their definition of innovation, and hence whether they should be engaged in the 10% initiative.

However, referring to these individuals as role integrators: in contrast to the individuals who were more inclined towards exploratory tasks, and whom we in section 5.2 argues for were role segmenters, the role integrators seemed to be more inclined toward exploitative tasks.

The tendency to exploit rather than explore is natural according to Tempelaar & Rosenkranz (2019). In contrast to Tempelaar & Rosenkranz (2019), however, who identify this behavior with role segmenters, we notice the tendency to be drawn towards exploitation foremost with the role integrators. Laureiro-Martínez et al. (2015) argue for a higher emotional cost of exploratory work due to the uncertainty it brings: while exploitative focus gives a more certain, however smaller, reward, exploratory work tasks bring the risk of a negative outcome. This could be a reason for individuals to be more inclined towards exploitation.

Among others of our interviewees, Jordan and Robin believed that it could be a good idea to divide the initiative within the teams and apply a more structural ambidexterity (O'Reilly & Tushman, 2008; 2013), since they notice how some colleagues do not seem to enjoy innovation time but mostly to experience stress from it. However, our interviewees do not share feelings of not being innovative or enjoying the 10% time themselves. Whether not admitting this is an action they take with awareness, in line with Alvesson & Kärreman's (2007) ideas of interviewees adjusting their answers due to political reasons, or if it is subconscious and they actually view themselves as innovative, we cannot be sure of. If the case is that some individuals would be better off focusing solely on innovation, and others not having to feel pressured by it, perhaps a structural kind of ambidexterity (O'Reilly & Tushman, 2008; 2013) would be more suitable. It seems that some employees identifying as innovative based on the organizational context (Friedman & Podolny, 1992), even though they perhaps are not inclined towards innovative work, stands in the way of this.

5.5 Main Empirical Findings in Response to our Research Question

This work aimed to answer the research question "*How do individuals experience the tensions of balancing exploratory and exploitative work?*". First, we realized that individuals need a certain structure to switch from longer periods of exploitation to shorter sequences of exploration. In practice, this means that individuals rather spend a whole day ('free Friday') every other week on exploration, instead of squeezing a few hours of exploration into their exploitative time. Using separate days for exploration, therefore, seems to support individuals with coping and resolving the related tensions. Second, using the aforementioned 'free Friday' for exploratory activities gives individuals (managers & subordinates) joy, energy, and provides them with the opportunity to get a break from their usual daily routines, and to

engage in more ‘fun’ tasks. While employees without managerial responsibilities rather separate exploitative and exploratory roles, managers tend to integrate these roles with each other. Nevertheless, individuals also highlight the difficulties associated with working ambidextrously, hence switching between roles, such as stress; frustration; the need for ‘warm-up time’ to explore; feeling drawn back to daily work tasks; and perceived pressure to innovate. For individuals in managerial roles, the tensions seem to also imply demands to act as ‘role models’, as well as ‘protectors of the initiative’. Lastly, some individuals seem to experience their engagement in exploitative tasks as exploration, through identifying with the organization and the 10% innovation initiative.

6 Conclusion

This study aimed to contribute to existing research through an understanding of how individuals experience working ambidextrously, by balancing exploratory activities and their daily work (exploitation). In the previous section, we have discussed our findings based on existing literature, and our own interpretations. This section will present how our empirical findings, interpretations, and analyses may contribute to existing theory. We will also share suggestions for future research, the limitations of our study, as well as practical implications.

6.1 Theoretical Contributions

This analysis contributed to an insight into the mind of individuals performing ambidextrous work. It showed a number of themes that were interpreted as vital to the individuals when evaluating their thoughts and feelings regarding balancing exploration and exploitation.

Regarding the structure of ambidextrous work: the messy blessing from the loosely defined initiative has led the individuals to create structures themselves: our findings indicate that the current lack of structure stands in the way of prioritizing the 10% initiative, both because of time management issues where the 90% projects are scheduled, but also because there is a lack of structure to bring ideas forward, which carries a risk of frustration connected to the 10% initiative. We argue that the lack of structure also imposes a risk on the organization, to miss out on ideas.

Individuals making their own decisions regarding the 10% initiative is in line with the idea of contextual ambidexterity (Gibson & Birkinshaw, 2004), nevertheless, on the individual level, employees cycle or switch between sequences of exploitation and exploration (Laureiro-Martínez et al., 2015). However, we interpret some of our findings as there being possible advantages from a structural approach to ambidexterity, where some individuals focus on exploration whereas others put their time on exploitative tasks (O'Reilly & Tushman, 2008). This scenario would consequently rather refer to ambidextrous teams, than to ambidextrous individuals (Andriopoulos and Lewis, 2009; 2010; Bledow et al., 2009).

The total freedom to explore new possibilities in the exploratory roles (Baum et al, 2000; March, 1991), we interpret as a source of positive feelings, such as being energized, related to the initiative. Those individuals that separate their roles clearly, we view as role segmenters: their role domains do not overlap (Edwards & Rothbard, 2000) which helps them avoid role conflict (Tempelaar & Rosenkranz, 2019). Tempelaar & Rosenkranz (2019) identified role integration as sufficient for individual ambidexterity while arguing for role segmentation to be less suitable, however, we suggest that also role segmentors could manage to work ambidextrously: individuals that are able to disconnect their exploitative demands while being in their exploratory roles. This allows them to ‘break free’ from their exploitative roles, until they have to switch back into these.

Our findings support the need for a ‘warm-up”-time when switching focuses, in line with e.g., Laureiro-Martinez et al. (2015). Our insights on challenges experienced from engaging in divergent thinking when exploring (Cropley, 2006) confirms the findings of Keller and Weibler (2015) as well as Laureiro-Martínez et al. (2015), but we also provide further evidence since our data includes both managers and non-managers.

We identified a downside to ambidextrous work in how some individuals 'fear' not being able to innovate (e.g., Birkinshaw & Gibson, 2004; Mom et al., 2009), which could impose an internal resistance to the switching between exploitation and exploration (Bidmon & Boe-Lillegraven, 2020; Tempelaar & Rosenkranz, 2019). Such finding confirms existing research on the difficulties of switching (e.g., Bidmon & Boe-Lillegraven, 2020; Rapp et al., 2017; Sok et al., 2016; Tempelaar & Rosenkranz, 2019).

Our findings related to how managers enjoy switching into their exploratory roles support the reasoning of Zhang et al. (2019), implying that ambidextrous behaviors might facilitate coping with work stress. The managers enjoy being on the same hierarchical level as their co-workers in the 10% time, and focusing on more exploratory tasks: the initiative gives them an opportunity to renew their knowledge and skills (Mom et al, 2019). However, while the initiative on the one hand provided these feelings of freedom and being on the same level as their subordinates, managers felt a need to make sure the initiative was protected, e.g., by clearing their subordinates’ schedules. To be able to do that, the managers seem to down-prioritize the 10% time for themselves, still emphasizing the need to act as role models regarding the initiative. The responsibility that comes with the managerial role seems to have

been integrated into the managers' exploratory roles (Tempelaar & Rosenkranz, 2019), which contradicts their alleged feelings of 'not being managers' in the 10% time.

The interviewees all claim to enjoy the 10% initiative, possibly based on the roles assigned by Innovate-Inc. through the initiative, as individuals identify with the organization and its image (Turner, 1990). However, some individuals engage in what we, based on March's (1991) definitions, argue for as being exploitative tasks in their 10% time: tasks that are closely related to the individuals' normal work tasks. The reason for this behavior could be to, more or less conscious, avoid stress and uncertainty related to leaving the familiar context of exploitation (Bidmon & Boe-Lillegraven, 2020; Laureiro-Martínez et al., 2015). It could also relate to the individual in question integrating the exploitative and the exploratory roles more (Tempelaar & Rosencranz, 2019). What this results in is still the 10% time being put on, according to our interpretations, exploitative tasks, which may imply that not all the individuals actually enjoy exploration. Even though the interviewees do not admit to disliking exploration themselves, as mentioned, some individuals believe that a division of the initiative within the team could be a good idea: implying a structural approach to ambidexterity rather than contextual (O'Reilly & Tushman, 2008; 2013). We hence argue that identifying with your organization may stand in the way of finding the optimal way for ambidextrous work.

6.2 Practical Implications

This research has contributed to a better insight into how individuals handle the tensions of balancing exploitative and exploratory work tasks and has also raised some questions which could contribute when organizations plan initiatives such as the one in the case study. A better understanding of the individuals' situations may improve the prerequisites for a successful implementation.

In the case of Innovate-Inc. the case study may give feedback that has not been aired within the organization, or that the employees themselves have not noticed to be a pattern. Based on our discussion in section 5.3.1, one example is how individuals in managerial positions seem to down-prioritize their own innovation time, sometimes to be able to help their subordinates use theirs. The organization emphasizes the importance of everybody contributing by

participating in the initiative, and people in managerial positions should then also participate: both to act as role models; to contribute with their own ideas; and to experience the feelings related to the 10% initiative. Even though a freely defined initiative is something the organization strives for, and that the employees appreciate, more structures could be beneficial, in line with the discussion in section 5.1. The employees seem to prefer to have fixed days for the 10% initiative, which has already been implemented by a big part of the organization, and most of the individuals do not want to feel forced to spend time on innovation. However, to facilitate, the organization could make sure that no meetings are scheduled these days. People who prefer to work on their daily tasks would then still be free to do so, but there would not be any meetings or scheduled activities hindering innovation time. This could help especially managers clear their schedules and make time for innovation.

6.3 Limitations

Being a qualitative case study, this thesis in its nature is limited: it cannot be generalized (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018). In line with the interpretive research traditions (Prasad, 2015), our study has a focus on subjective meanings which implies that it cannot be analyzed objectively. The findings are highly affected by the individuals participating in the interviews (Schaefer & Alvesson, 2020), as well as by the researchers' subjectiveness. Us all being part of the case organization (the researchers only visiting for a brief period of time, but still in the context) may affect the interviewees' answers as well as our interpretations of the material.

Being part of the organization, and participating in interviews during work hours, about issues related to work, the interviewees' statements have been colored by a professional state of mind. While our interviews were focused on the individuals, with the aim to discuss feelings, thoughts, and ideas on the individual level, the interviewees may have been affected by the surroundings and hence answered our questions from a professional perspective. This becomes clear as many interviewees have the broader organizational goals in mind throughout the interviews when asked about how they experience the initiative. Related to the organizational focus and the professional perspective, another limitation to take into account is the risk of individual employees viewing the interview as a possibility for political action (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007).

6.4 Future Research

While working on this thesis, we had to prioritize our focuses and hence chose to exclude a focus on the learning flows from organizational-, team- and individual levels, which we initially included in our research and discussed in many of the interviews. The ambidextrous setting seems to enhance new learning in the organization but looking into how the ideas flow between the different levels and are hence institutionalized, has been beyond the scope of this study. However, we believe that using an organizational learning framework to analyze individual ambidexterity could bring more insights into how organizations can benefit from ambidextrous individuals.

Another focus that we were unable to prioritize, but that did occur in our interviews on multiple occasions, was individuals getting attached to their ideas. The attachment to one's own idea and the reluctance to drop the idea in question when there is little or no interest from the rest of the organization is shown in our interviews. While we did keep this as one of our themes initially, we were forced to down-prioritize these findings to leave room for other, more prominent themes.

When it comes to managers, we have identified a paradox in how managers on the one hand feel the need to act as role models and to protect the initiative, while on the other hand being the ones down-prioritizing their own time on the initiative the most. While acting as role models in the 10% initiative would demand managers to put the time into the initiative themselves, they often don't manage to clear their own schedules for innovation time even though they are strict when it comes to clearing the schedules of their subordinates. The managers also claim to enjoy being free from their managerial roles in the 10% time, while they in fact bring their managerial responsibilities by acting as role models. Even though there exists research on managers coping with ambidextrous work, the subject could be researched further, focusing on how managers handle these paradoxes.

As a final suggestion for future research, studies could try to compare different approaches to individual ambidexterity. This relates, on the one hand, to the question of whether all individuals should work ambidextrously. On the other hand, it also implies the question of whether a more team-oriented approach to ambidexterity, where some individuals explore and others exploit, could be more suitable for organizations.

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Appendix 1 - Interview guide

1. How do you understand the 10% initiative?
➢ Why do you think it is important?

2. How do you feel about innovation and learning general?
➢ How and why do you think that learning and innovation are related or not?

3. How do you experience the way the organization has chosen to balance in that 90% core work and 10% innovation manner?

4. How do you practically handle the 10% initiative?
➢ And how do your team members handle the initiative?
➢ And have you discussed how to handle the initiative within the team?

5. How do you feel about your role when you are engaging in the 90% and in the 10%?

6. How does your self-image depend on the work task in focus (balancing the 90% and 10%)?

7. How do you experience the balancing process?
➢ How do you feel hindered and/or supported to balance tasks?
➢ How does the balancing affect you in terms of positive and negative consequences?

8. How do you experience the idea's journey from you as an individual to the team, and to the organizational level?

(We used 'What' and 'How' questions to follow up)

Appendix 2 - List of Interviewees

Time in the company is listed in intervals: [<1 year]; [1-2 years]; [2-5 years]; [5-10 years]

1 - team lead, engineer, 2-5 years - Jordan

2 - engineer, 1-2 years - Lee

3 - team lead, engineer, 2-5 years - Robin

4 - team lead, engineer, 5-10 years - Kelly

5- product owner, 2-5 years - Ashley

6- project manager, <1 year - Gene

8- director, 1-5 years - Sydney

9- team manager, [-] - Kim

10- engineer, 5-10 years - Morgan

11- engineer manager, 1-5 years - Ray

12- project manager, 5-10 years - Shannon

13- engineer manager, 1-5 years - Cory