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“Free In a Way” - Concealed Control

Tension and Prospects Between Autonomy and Control in an Aspiring Flat Organization

Authors: Anna Nilsson & Julia Pospelova

Supervisor: Roland Paulsen

Examiner: Monica Müller

Abstract

- Title:** “Free in a Way” - Concealed Control, *Tension and Prospects Between Autonomy and Control in an Aspiring Flat Organization*
- Authors:** Anna Nilsson and Julia Pospelova
- Supervisor:** Roland Paulsen, Lund University Sweden
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- Key words:** flat structure, control, autonomy, transparency, knowledge-intensive firms, normative control, feedback
- Purpose:** The purpose of this study is to investigate the factors that impact the perception of control and autonomy in an aspiring flat organization where the employees are working in cross-functional teams. In this study, we seek to identify dilemmas that may influence the complexity and ambiguity of an aspiring flat organization.
- Methodology:** The paper is based on a qualitative single case study with an abductive approach. The collected data consists of eleven semi-structured interviews.
- Theoretical perspectives:** Our literature review presents existing research about knowledge-intensive firms and flat structure companies. Additionally, we demonstrate literature around control, normative control and autonomy in order to identify how they interplay.
- Conclusion:** We conclude that the tension between autonomy and control is minimized when working in cross-functional teams due to the dependence the workers have on each other. Control based on coordination suggests less perception of control emphasizing a suggested balance between autonomy and control.

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“Knowledge has a beginning but no end.”

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We wish you a pleasant reading!

Anna Nilsson & Julia Pospelova

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background

“Well, what I love about Appli is that we don’t have hard measurements. It is truly free in a way. But of course, you have to make sure that you do what the customer wants you to do.”

Creative and innovative companies that we nowadays know as knowledge-intensive firms (henceforth KIF) have generated a massive shift from manufacturing economies to knowledge and service industries. The innovation of technology has created new work environments and work tasks that are ambiguous, creative and context-specific (Alvesson, 2001). Knowledge workers are the most valuable assets of the 21st-century that are defined as individuals who apply theoretical and analytical knowledge in their daily work (Drucker, 1956). It is previously argued that knowledge workers may have greater insights into the work tasks than the manager due to their distinct skills and expertise. As a result, knowledge workers may carry more authority than a formal manager since the work is rather based on specialty than the title, making the hierarchical structure flexible (Alvesson, 2004). When managing knowledge workers, the relevance of managerial control is less prominent. Instead, the employees hold more responsibility and autonomy over their work (Alvesson, 2004). Autonomy is defined as encouraging employees with freedom, independence, and discretion in planning and executing the work (Hackman & Oldham, 1975).

Today, organizations have a stronger focus on employee empowerment (Mills & Ungson, 2003; Speitzer, 1995, 1996) and empowering employees’ autonomy (Hackman & Oldham, 1975). Giving autonomy to employees is associated with higher engagement, job satisfaction, and performance (Griffin, 1981; Hackman & Oldham, 1975). Autonomy also enhances self-efficacy and motivation (Saragih, 2011; Lu et al., 2017). However, Deci and Ryan (1987) demonstrate in their study that distinguishing between what activities will support autonomy and what type of activities will control behavior can be difficult to detect. They refer to different contextual and personal factors influencing whether the activity promotes autonomy or perceives it as controlling (Deci & Ryan 1987). The fine line between control and freedom at the workplace holds tension while simultaneously aspiring for balance. In KIFs, where the desire and need for autonomy are strong, the managerial dilemma of balancing autonomy and control is argued to be complex (Friedman, 1977; Lowendahl, 1997). Autonomy is desired and essential for the knowledge workers;

some control is still needed to align the workers' jobs and make sure that everyone works towards the company's objectives. Besides that, while companies tend to empower workers with autonomy, they also aim to become less hierarchical (Diefenbach & Sillince, 2011), creating new contexts for autonomy and control. For example, self-managed teams are often emphasized in flat structure companies, and the boundaries between a manager and a non-manager are often unclear (Spencer & Muchnick, 2015). Research also demonstrates that even though organizations tend to have less managerial control and give autonomy to the employees, control can be shaped by external forces such as customers and clients (O'Riain, 2010).

KIFs tend to shift from behavioral and output control to normative control to balance autonomy and control (Robertson & Swan, 2003). Normative control aims to target employees' minds by regulating their self-images, feelings, and identifications to get the employees to identify with the organizational goals (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). In line with Foucault's (1991) concept of norms and normalization, we can identify cultural norms everywhere. Hence, studying informal controls based on company norms or group norms is something researchers find intriguing in the current research field. However, normative control has been criticized for its manipulative form (Kunda, 1992) and studies have shown that normative control can have a greater ability to control than traditional hierarchical and bureaucratic control (Barker, 1993). Therefore, it is important to address informal control in the context of the tension between establishing autonomy and maintaining control in organizations that are identified as knowledge-intensive and flat.

One example of an industry characterized as knowledge-intensive that tends to have less hierarchical levels is the technology companies. In those companies, self-managed teams are often emphasized, and the boundaries between a manager and a non-manager are often unclear (Spencer & Muchnick, 2015), which creates other conditions for autonomy and control. Whereas the tension between autonomy and control is well-studied, we found a scarcity of research analyses on how employees in companies with less hierarchical levels working in cross-functional teams perceive autonomy and control. Considering this, our study will use the IT agency Appli as a case company. Appli aspires to have a flat structure with few hierarchical levels and is organized by several cross-functional teams that work toward the same client and product. Referring to the first quote in the introduction, we demonstrate the direction of this thesis. While Appli describes itself as flat, they still have some hierarchical levels with middle managers. Therefore, we will label Appli as an aspiring flat structure in this study. In line with Alvesson and Sandberg (2011), this study will

consider the existing literature on the tension between autonomy and control in order to have new insights and a deeper understanding of the research topic.

1.2 Purpose and Research Question

This study aims to investigate the factors that impact the perception of control and autonomy in an organization with few hierarchical levels, where the employees are working in cross-functional teams. This study set out to analyze how organizational structure influences employees' perception of control and autonomy in an IT agency. Therefore our study aims to answer the following research questions:

- *How does employees' perception of control and autonomy interplay in an aspiring flat structure organization?*
- *How does the team structure influence the perception of control and autonomy?*

1.3 Main Findings

Our findings show that working in cross-functional teams in a less hierarchical company has created more control influences from clients and team members rather than from the managers. Low managerial control has increased employees' perception of autonomy. The main control activities in the daily work are based on coordination between the team members. Our study shows that working in a team creates natural dependencies and a greater acceptance of control activities while maintaining the balance between autonomy and control. The organizational transparency was perceived as something supporting the autonomous work environment and openness to share in an aspiring flat company. Moreover, we discovered that the flat structure has resulted in a lack of processes and structure for feedback in the daily operations.

1.4 Research outline

This thesis consists of six different chapters. In this introductory chapter, we have presented the context for our research regarding concepts of organizational control and autonomy in an aspiring

flat organization. The second chapter will present the literature review of the theoretical framework, including knowledge-intensive firms with a focus on flat structures and the parameters of autonomy and control in the workplace. In the third chapter, we will describe the methodology grounding for our research, such as philosophical grounding, research approach, data collection and data analysis method. The following chapter presents the empirical findings, which will be discussed in chapter five in relation to current knowledge. The last chapter will present the conclusion of the study, including providing theoretical contributions as well as practical implications, reflection on possible limitations and suggestions for future research.

2 Literature review

This section presents relevant literature regarding our study outline. We begin by examining the literature on the organizational structures and characteristics of knowledge-intensive firms, particularly focusing on the role of flat organizations. Thereafter, the literature delves into the concepts of autonomy and control concerning the less formal types of normative control. The chapter is finalized by identifying the possible consequences of tension between autonomy and control.

2.1 Knowledge-Intensive Organizations Aspiring to Create Flat Structures

Organizational structure provides a foundation over which the organization functions and affects how the organizational members behave (Dalton et al., 1980). Researchers usually distinguish between flat and tall dimensions when describing the organizational structure, which refer to the number of hierarchical levels in an organization. A flat organization structure refers to an organization with few hierarchical levels, where every level has a wider average span of control than a tall organization (Dalton et al., 1980). In contemporary society, companies tend to become less hierarchical. However, Diefenbach and Sillince (2011) claim that the hierarchy still seems to persist in the form of both formal and informal hierarchies. When formal hierarchy is based on formal vertical integration, informal hierarchies emerge from social interactions and relationships (Diefenbach & Sillince, 2011). It is unclear what happens when organizations give autonomy, and the theories surrounding this disregard the fact that hierarchical companies are not designed to deal with the uncertainty involved with relinquishing control (Langfred & Rockmann, 2016).

This trend of implementing a flat structure is widely identified, especially in companies that are described as knowledge-intensive (Drucker, 1988). A widely accepted definition of KIFs is specified as ‘companies where most work can be said to be intellectual and where well-educated, qualified employees form the major part of the workforce’ (Alvesson, 2001, p. 863). Popular assumptions about KIFs argue that knowledge expertise is the key asset for organizations that value intellectual work and create a source of competitive advantage (Spender & Scherer, 2007; Sewell, 2005). Another common attribute of KIFs is their creative and innovative approach to providing solutions for complex problems in specific knowledge spheres (Morris & Empson, 1998).

Common business fields categorized as KIFs are computer consultancy, high-technology companies, law firms, accounting firms, engineering, advertising, and research and development agencies (Alvesson, 2001). Moreover, KIFs are often working with clients with uncertain and ambiguous matters. The high-technology industry for instance represents a business that provides services and supplies to information technology (IT) in the forms of electronics, software, artificial intelligence and computers. Today high-technology companies are distinguishable from other kinds of companies because of their constant contribution to production in various forms, such as knowledge. The idiosyncratic knowledge and the client work create a great challenge for knowledge workers to evaluate and monitor performance and develop performance instructions for personnel (Fichman & Leventhal, 1991). Due to this, these companies have less formalized structures, flexible routines and fewer hierarchical management roles (Alvesson, 1995).

One study of computer consultants showed that evaluating workers created uncertainty because of unreliable or absent criteria for evaluating work (Alvesson, 2001; Deetz, 1997). Deetz (1997) stressed that active communication and negotiation are the way to define problems and develop solutions for the clients. Knowledge workers adapt to low levels of formalization when it comes to specific work processes making the nature of work more innovative and flexible. Flat organizations, however, are slower with handling conflicts and coordinating the teamwork but are better at processing decisions (Carzo & Yanouzas, 1969). Teamwork is often emphasized in flat structures, when lines between manager and non-manager are not clear (Spencer & Muchnick, 2015). Instead of direct managers, self-managed teams and self-directed individuals tend to practice leadership that carries characteristics of knowledge-intensive companies. Some degree of formalization is necessary for coordination and collaboration with project-based work (Lowendahl, 1997; Scarbrough, 1999). Starbuck (1992) stressed the need to maintain a “delicate balance” between control and autonomy at KIFs. However, how to make it happen is not fully reasoned in organizational studies that intend to review control and autonomy in knowledge-intensive firms (Robertson and Swan, 2003).

Studies have concentrated on results of research and development activity measurements but less on functioning and management impact on tech employees (Zakrzewska-Bielawska, 2010). One study highlighted that technical understanding played a less crucial role for the project outcomes than the social relationship with the client and within the project team (Alvesson, 1995). Even more

important aspects of consultant work were described as getting along, clarifying expectations, and obtaining acceptance (Alvesson, 1995).

Thus, although an organization seems to be of a flatter character, the hierarchy can still remain due to the increase of informal hierarchies which influences the power and control relationship in an organization (Diefenbach & Sillince, 2011). With these considerations in mind, most research on knowledge workers stresses that the increase in ambiguous work has influenced the structure of organizations to become flatter, with a focus on cultural control and self-regulation (Powell, 1991; Reed, 1998). Therefore, next, we proceed into literature to think about autonomy and control in knowledge-intensive firms.

2.2 Setting Direction to an Autonomous Organization

Autonomy refers to the freedom, independence, and discretion when planning and executing their job (Hackman & Oldham, 1976). The purpose of autonomy is to support intrinsic motivation, engagement, creative thinking, cognitive flexibility, trust, and the ability to adapt to organizational changes and increase self-esteem and physical and psychological health (Deci & Ryan, 1987). With knowledge-intensive firms on the rise, task autonomy increases and becomes more prevalent. (Reinhardt et al., 2011). However, Langfred and Rockmann (2016) argue that the change of nature of work has made autonomy more of a complex, varied and nuanced job characteristic.

Organizations can provide autonomy to employees in different aspects, such as the responsibility to decide what to work on, how to work, when to work, and where to work (Langfred & Rockmann, 2016). According to Langfred and Rockmann (2016), the prerequisites for autonomy depend on the characteristics of the work tasks. For example, the autonomy for software developers requires more discretion due to software developers' dependence on other employees' tasks, while the outcome of each aspect of the work is uncertain and ambiguous. This uncertainty of the outcome and dependency on other workers creates a need for control over more than just their own task, which has provided the individual worker with a greater scope of autonomy (Langfred & Rockmann, 2016). In the last decade, there has also been an increasing interest in giving employees autonomy by allowing employees to decide when and where they wish to work (Langfred & Rockmann, 2016). For example, today, many organizations provide hybrid work settings, allowing people to

work both remotely and from the office. Giving employees the possibility to work remotely increases the perception of autonomy (Kurland & Egan, 1999) as well as decreases the direct control from supervisors (Dubrin, 1991). Additionally, in the past few decades, researchers have noted the change in employees' expectations, as employers' role is to consider not only the capabilities of employees but also their values, motives, and preferences creating informal autonomy and supporting neo-normative advantages (Rousseau, Ho, & Greenberg, 2006, Fleming, 2009). What is evident in KIFs is that employees often negotiate about their ambiguous work tasks and the level of autonomy they carry in their position (Hornung et al., 2010).

Employees' perception of autonomy is often reflected in the relationship to control, whereas organizational activities either can support autonomy or perceive as control (Deci & Ryan, 1987). Thus, a distinction between control and autonomy is relevant. Considering this, the following section of the literature review will present different kinds of control and how to solve the managerial dilemma regarding the tension between autonomy and control.

2.3 Controlling Features

A growing body of research in the field of organizational control is adapting business outcomes to examine alternative aspects of control. To critically view organizational control, we must highlight that control carries divergent motives and interests for the organization and refer to a socially and politically created environment for specific purposes.

Control is defined as “any process whereby managers direct attention, motivate, and encourage organizational members to act in ways desirable to achieving the organization's objectives” (Cardinal et al. 2010, p.56). In the past, control was mostly carried out through formal mechanisms that emphasized managers' direct functions to control employees (March and Simon, 1958; Anthony, 1952; Blau and Scott, 1962; Fayol, 1949; Weber, 1946). Fayol's (1949) principles of management regarded controlling, coordinating, organizing, and planning as the foundation of the conceptualized 14 principles of management. Simultaneously characteristics of bureaucracy and authority set a playground for control mechanisms in management studies (Weber, 1946).

Cardinal (2001) proposed three formal control targets that are exercised during various situations in which the organization finds itself: input, behavior and output controls. The characteristics of control are also designed to achieve specific goals, create manager centricity and hold multifaceted influence (Cardinal et al., 2017). We will discuss these characteristics in greater detail.

Goal orientation means that control mechanisms are designed to reach specific organizational goals. However, organizational goals can be complex and differ from those of the employees, which makes it management's most challenging problem (Dess, 1987). Tannenbaum and Kahn stressed, "It is the function of control to see that organizational requirements are properly met, and the ultimate goals of the organization achieved" (Tannenbaum & Kahn, 1957, p.127). Moreover, Tannenbaum's interest in control incorporated the general idea of an individual's role in the control structure influencing larger roles across levels in the organization, thereby emphasizing the ambition and the distribution of control (Tannenbaum, 1956; McMahon & Perritt, 1971). Findings showed that, the higher managers were in the hierarchy, the less they worried about behavior control which considers how workers perform by evaluating their behavior (Ouchi, 1975). In contrast, employees and managers that worked at lower hierarchical levels experienced more behavior control at work (Ouchi, 1975).

A major contributor to the field of behavior and output control was Ouchi's (1977) early work. Ouchi defined control as: "an evaluation process which is based on the monitoring and evaluation of behavior or of outputs" (Ouchi, 1977, p.95). This formal control mechanism puts a great emphasis on output control that serves the control needs of the organization, while behavior control emphasizes the abilities of the individual manager. Output control scrutinizes the overall quality of products or services through measurable performance monitoring. The core of output control is based on the relationship between a manager and subordinate. Moreover, it is the manager who is in charge of deciding upon the general expectations of an employee's performance and monitoring and making sure the measured performance is aligned with the expectations and values of the organization (Tannenbaum & Kahn, 1957). In comparison, behavior control considers the authority to control the actions of employees. As a result, manager-centricity is present in both control types. However, control does not correspond to only managerial practices.

Multifaceted control observes differentiating concepts that consider the overall impact. For example, Ouchi (1980) established three control systems that mediated control causes such as

bureaucracies, markets and clans. Efficiency exists in markets when performance ambiguity is low, and goals are incongruent; in bureaucracies when both goals and performance ambiguity are moderately high; and in clans when both goals and performance ambiguity are low (Ouchi, 1980). Regarding the purpose of this study, we stress clan control to be considered in more detail. Clan control is a non-standardized type of control that relies on input control, shared traditions, values, and norms. It strongly differs from bureaucracies and markets that use behavior and output control, making the clan control independent from explicit monitoring and evaluation (Ouchi, 1980). Clan control represents cultural values, shared norms and informal relationships that guide the activities in an organization to achieve mutual goals. It has also been studied from the perception of the company being “the imagery of the family” that has strong emotional ties and paternal management (Costas, 2012; Kunda, 1992). The relevance of corporate culture and high performance was emphasized in multiple studies (Deal & Kennedy, 1982; Peters & Waterman, 1982). Peter and Waterman (1982) demonstrated that clan-like control is a key success factor, but it may also destroy a company if it is totally adapted. Therefore, organizations today have to adapt to a rapidly changing environment while maintaining a strong organizational culture and relying more on informal control mechanisms.

Cardinal et al. (2004) attracted attention to the need to research informal control targets by explaining that it may be possible to influence the organization using both formal control mechanisms and informal control. Informal control is a stable form of monitoring in flat organizations that stimulate authenticity and freedom of not feeling controlled at work. Simultaneously, informal communication and power dynamics are central to the maintenance of the work tasks that are part of the job role. Employees are expected to be more proactive in their roles when work is not measured directly (Grant & Ashford, 2008). Web workers' tasks, however, are often dependent on social ties such as clients, collaborators, teams and representatives of other competence areas that have an impact on this type of control (Damarin, 2013).

2.3.2 Normative Control

Robertson and Swan (2003) argue that normative control is more relevant than behavioral and output control when managing knowledge workers due to its potential to balance control and autonomy. Normative control is about shaping the minds of individuals, often in an informal manner that controls the experiences, thoughts and feelings, by guiding the behavior of employees

to align with corporate interests (Kunda, 1992). Alvesson and Willmott (2002) support it by defining normative control targets employees' minds by regulating their self-images, feelings, and identifications to get the employees to identify with the organizational goals.

By targeting employees' minds, normative control aims to get employees to internalize with the company's values (Willmott, 1993). In this way, the employee's mind is shaped to align with the company's values, which guide them to act in the interests of the organization, and formal control and formalization are reduced, resulting in higher autonomy (Mintzberg, 1979). Kunda's (1992) ethnographic research stressed the influence of corporate culture by studying how the boundaries between self and organization shape normative norms of the company. The findings state that employees weigh their "corporate self" and "real selves" when experiencing normative control at work (Kunda, 1992). Such an environment decreases feelings of work alienation and is typically associated with high-skilled professionals work environments where workers tend to form an emotional identification with the company (Alvesson, 2001; Kunda, 1992; Fleming & Sturdy, 2011). Peters and Waterman (1982, p. 77) stated that "you either buy into their (organizational) norms or you get out". Their study showed that too much normative or clan control might lead to a disaster on an organizational level due to coercive culture and individually leading to employee burnout and cynicism (Peters & Waterman, 1982; Fleming & Spicer, 2003). Another downside of normative control is found in Kunda's (1992) findings, where he observed software engineers who strived for "doing the right thing", eventually dealt with burnout symptoms.

Normative control must be normalized to have an effect on society (Foucault, 1980). For example, when organizations characterize themselves as "being professional", it sets a tone for organizations stating that these are the norms and expectations that employees are expected to follow (Willmott, 1993; Kunda, 1992). Normalization is usually a process that is based on changes in self-perception and social interactions with others. Researchers tend to emphasize the norms that are based on professionalism in organizations' that are more ambiguous and knowledge-intensive (Mintzberg, 1979; Lowendahl, 1997; Kunda, 1992).

Barker's study about self-managing teams (1993) shows how normative control can effectively control people. His research noticed that normative control could occur horizontally, which he labeled as concertive control. Barker (1993) observed an increase of implementing self-managing teams where the teams were provided almost complete autonomy but guided by the company's values. The self-managed teams created their own normative rules that were more influential and

had a greater ability to control than the traditionally hierarchical and bureaucratic control (Barker, 1993). Normative control motivates team members to comply with group standards out of belonging and inclusion in the group. This strong sense of control by normative processes could there contradict with its possibility to best balance the tension between autonomy and control. Other studies have further found out that normative mechanisms that were in coherence with individual level and team level demonstrated a positive effect on teams' performance (Courtright & Barrick, 2012).

Liberation management has introduced the concept of neo-normative control, which has encircled the fun and work within the same definition. So-called neo-normative control emphasizes the new norm of "just be yourself" and embraces playfulness, fun and authenticity at work (Fleming & Sturdy, 2009). It places heterogeneity and individualization to form the behavior and attitudes of employees. Moreover, the perception of the organization as a "family" that is supported in clan control is transformed into a culture of friendship that generates an egalitarian culture where individuals are encouraged to show their true selves (Costas, 2012; Fleming & Sturdy, 2009)

2.4 Detecting Tension Between Autonomy and Control

A fundamental aim of organizations and organization studies is finding a good balance between autonomy and control. For example, March (1988) suggested that theories which consider choice, learning, selection and change are useful for empirical studies since they create tension between control and autonomy. Nevertheless, it creates its own challenges due to the abstract and theoretical backgrounds of the autonomy concept. It indicates to some extent of empirical consequences but is questioned for its verifiability (Deci & Ryan, 1987). Similarly, the concept of normative control faces challenges that are important to acknowledge. The two trends of studies that focus on supporting autonomy and consequences of control have focused on specific environmental events or interpersonal and social contexts. By studying specific environmental events, researchers considered task-contingent rewards, positive feedback, and set-up deadlines (Deci et al., 1981) whereas interpersonal or social contexts focused on an individual's experience, attitudes and behavior in an autonomy-supportive or a controlling milieu (Deci & Ryan, 1987). Findings suggest that intrinsic motivation was optimized during autonomy-supportive environments when controlling work settings would weaken intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1980; Schwartz et al., 1981). Because of the wide range of nuances in interpreting the experiences of autonomy and control, this

hypothesis serves as a guide for our research. Moreover, positive competence feedback played a fundamental role in a study by Ryan et al. (1982), who argued that interpersonal context had an influence on the perception of a supportive or controlling environment.

3 Methodology

The following chapter outlines the methodological grounding of this study. We introduce our philosophical grounding and qualitative research approach. Then we describe our research design based on abductive reasoning and a single case study. Thereafter, we present the data collection process and the data analysis. Finally, we evaluate the quality of the research and justify limitations with the chosen method.

3.1 Philosophical Grounding

Our study aimed to investigate how employees perceive autonomy and control in organizations that aspire to be flat structured. A qualitative research method was chosen to gain a detailed understanding of the perceptions and tensions between these two concepts. The nature of the qualitative study explored the factors that affect individuals' perceptions and behavior in an adaptable environment. One advantage of this approach was the ability to characterize internal streams of epistemological perspectives (Bryman et al., 2019). The consideration of ontological reflection constructed a theoretical part while we prioritized the social context of constructionism. It was based on the implication of social interaction and constant review mechanisms that helped with constructing an overall understanding of social phenomena and themes around it (Bryman et al., 2019). Even so, characteristics of objectivistic methods were apparent since theoretical methods influenced the understanding of organizational structures that consider the social world to be separated from its actors. However, we should highlight the influence of objectivism being less relevant for this study since our research ambition considered both methods as something that impacts the nature of knowledge of the social world. As a result, we interpreted symbolic interactionism as the base for conceptualizing organization structure and interactions between workers. Observing empirically in such a way that a person is continually interpreting the symbolic meaning of his or her environment was interpreting reality on a symbolic level (Bryman et al., 2019). Moreover, this study aimed to examine the process of interpretation that employees used when trying to understand their actions (Blummer, 1962).

We interpreted the structure of the company as the objective phenomenon that addressed social actors forming reality. The epistemological aspect strived to create an understanding of the social world through individuals' interpretations. Furthermore, social interactions are shaped and negotiated by individual realities that establish social realities (Prasad, 2017). In particular, the interpretive approach aimed to obtain further in-depth information on the perception of organizational control and ownership over employees' work through a sense of autonomy at work. Hence, we positioned Weber's "verstehen" approach in order to place ourselves in the position of others to understand each individual's point of view. Weber's definition absorbs explanation and understanding when it comes to interpretivism, while Schultz approaches it through phenomenology (Weber, 1946, Bryman et al., 2019). Both philosophies seek to understand the meaning of a person's behavior by applying complex comprehension behind individuals' social worlds (Bodgan & Taylor, 1975).

Certainly, a study focusing on interpretivism strives for placing the material into a theoretical framework and aligning with the theme of the study while reflecting on the distinctiveness of people's perceptions. The interpretivism method involved a continuous dialogical relationship between theory and the empirical data that developed reflexivity into the application of narratives and grounded theory. The emotional experience of control in the company was adapted from a grounded analysis of focus groups based on interview participants. The research approach concerned the "how" and "why" interpretations of social behavior of the employees that challenged the causal explanation of the actions and effects (Weber, 1947).

3.2 Research Approach

In line with qualitative study, our research design was structured using an abductive approach in order to understand individuals' perceptions of social phenomena, such as the presence of different types of control and autonomy at the case company. An abductive approach is a combination of deductive and inductive approaches with the aim to overcome the limitations of deductive and inductive reasoning (Prasad, 2017). Deductive reasoning is based on a logical approach that follows a specific top-down conclusion, while inductive reasoning is seen as rather opposite to deduction. The inductive process is about observing phenomena and then formulating general conclusions based on these observations. Both approaches have advantages and disadvantages. Deductive

limitations are associated with dependency on logic and theory-testing whereas inductive limitations come from its abstract and incomplete empirical material that may turn out to be incorrect despite an accurate data observation (Prasad, 2017). Limitations with inductive reasoning are associated with its difficulty in relying on empirical data to enable theory-building. Using an abductive approach created flexibility to reinterpret concepts and create deep relationships between theory and findings (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2018). In other words, working simultaneously with existing knowledge and analyzing our collected data created flexibility and opportunity to explore new insights. Alvesson and Kärreman (2007) argue that this flexibility is crucial for the researcher to remain open to possible new insights rather than using the empirical data to confirm their preunderstanding. Therefore, an application of abductive approach was applied in the data collection and analysis process. In practice, this meant that we initially started to study organizational control in a broad scope. The collected data through the semi-structured interviews then guided us into further literature review within flat structure companies and autonomy. Thus, we let the collected data steer our study within the scope of organizational control. As Styrhe (2013) points out, one cannot know what one will find until one enters a study field.

3.3 Case Study Design

Furthermore, we used a single case study design. A single case study is usually appropriate when aiming to understand something in-depth and in detail (Bryman et al., 2019). Exemplifying case study explores common phenomena in more detail in order to capture the form of conditions and environment that is there (Yin, 2009). Although, a case study approach is considered appropriate to fulfill the purpose of the study, it is important to highlight that there are some limitations to the case study design. When conducting a single case study, there is a higher risk that the findings are only relevant to the specific company studied than when conducting a multiple case study (Herriott & Firestone, 1983). However, considering that a single case study allows for detailed and in-depth data, we consider the advantages to compensate for the limitations for fulfilling the purpose of this study. As this research aims to explore how employees in knowledge-intensive firms perceive autonomy and control, the case company was chosen based on the features of a knowledge-intensive organization. Most of the work in the case company is intellectual and is performed by highly educated employees, mostly technical engineers. The company's structure is also described as of flatter character, with cross-functional teams. According to Alvesson (2004),

these characteristics of a company are components of a knowledge-intensive firm. Additionally, the company was selected due to its success within its industry, thus potentially allowing for contributions to other knowledge-intensive firms.

3.3.1 Case Company

Our case company Appli is an IT agency specializing in developing web and software applications for external partners. Appli is known for creating a wide range of technological products and customized services depending on each client's specific needs. It is characterized as an IT agency that aspires to have few hierarchical levels. According to a senior manager, Appli has around five hierarchical levels but stresses that daily operations are rather flat since employees do not have special titles and are able to be in contact with each other without hierarchical barriers.

The company is organized by cross-functional teams based on each partner's needs and the deal they have. Cross-functional teams are a group of people with different specialty and expertise working together for specific organizational goals. In this case, teams consist of team leads, product leads, developers, designers, and quality assurance specialists. Teams usually have several employees from each expertise and tend to work together on various tasks. Each employee is responsible for performing task-specific activities and collaborating with team members that work on different functions.

Appli has been growing rapidly over the past couple of years which means that new employees are hired constantly. As of now, Appli employs around 250 employees in three different countries and five office studios. Appli implements a hybrid work setting which means that employees can decide if they prefer to work from home or the office. In order to study how employees of high-technology companies perceive control and autonomy, we conduct a qualitative case study of the company Appli.

3.4 Data Collection

Our primary data was based on semi-structured interviews with eleven employees from the case company Appli. Semi-structured interviews were conducted on predetermined questions while allowing the interviewer to add further questions and steer the conversation in a certain direction

depending on the respondents' answers (Bryman et al., 2019). This interview format was appropriate for our study as it advanced respondents to talk openly about their perceptions, creating a deeper understanding of the social reality. We emphasized the use of open-ended questions to give the respondents freedom to formulate their answers accordingly (Bryman et al., 2019).

An interview guide was constructed based on five different themes to ensure that relevant data was collected during the interviews. The five different themes were decided based on the research scope and preliminary literature around our topic. In the first two pilot interviews, we asked questions about control measurement and perception of autonomy at work. After a tentative analysis of the first interviews, we discovered new directions for our study (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The interview questions and interview guide were improved to align with the structure of the company. The interviews took from 45 to 60 minutes, depending on the interview flow and the time the interviewees took to answer our questions.

Every interview started with a short introduction of the researchers and the topic. Interviewees were informed about the anonymity and asked for allowance for recording the interviews. We audio-recorded all interviews and anonymized the interviewees' identities by using pseudonyms. Interviewees were constructed of different themes and every theme started with broad questions and then specified the topics that the interviewees decided to talk about. Some individuals were able to give practical examples of their experiences, but some spoke on a more abstract and general level. Therefore, some questions were based on specific examples of different events. Different themes of interview questions were asked in mixed order depending on the interview participants' answers.

The interviews were carried out with Google meet since the location of interviewers and interviewees varied. It was beneficial for us to conduct digital interviews since we were able to interview people working in different parts of Sweden and outside Sweden. One limitation with digital interviews was that no physical interaction or body language could not be noticed. However, since digital interviews allowed us to interview employees from different locations, the advantages outweighed the disadvantages.

3.4.1 Secondary Data

As a complement to the collected interviews, we further analyzed one document based on a specific model Appli used for performance appraisals. We noticed that the employees referred to this specific appraisal model during the interviews. Therefore, we chose to study this document to gain a clearer understanding of the model, which clarified our understanding of employees' perceptions of the appraisal model. It was highly confidential material that restricted us from sharing any content of the document. However, the document generated a general representation of the reality of Appli. It helped us to better understand not only what employees thought about it, but also realize what it was all about and what was going on in our case organization (Bryman et al., 2019). In other words, the misinterpretation of employees' answers was reduced by analyzing the model from an objective perspective.

3.4.1 Sampling and Selection of Interviewees

When conducting a qualitative study, several sampling strategies can be used to select interviewees. In this study, the sampling was conducted by a purposive sampling approach. We used a purposive sampling method combined to ensure that we interviewed employees who together represent different roles and departments in the company. The participants in this study were selected by using two channels: Appli's internal slack channel and LinkedIn. An introduction message about the study was first posted on their internal slack channel, after which we initiated secondary participant selection through LinkedIn. We then sent personal messages to people to select employees who together represent different roles and departments in the company. The reason behind this was that we wanted to have a comprehensive understanding of the perception of control and autonomy within the company. Secondly, the reason was that the company was structured in cross-functional teams, meaning working in teams with different expertise. To understand how the team structure influences the perception of control and autonomy, we selected employees from different teams, roles, and seniority levels.

Moreover, we followed a sequential approach by letting the selection of employees to be an evolving process throughout the study. A sequential approach is considered appropriate since we could gradually add participants based on whose employees' perceptions would be valuable to answer the research question (Bryam et al., 2017). An initial meeting with the case company's HR

manager gave us an overall understanding of the structure of the company. Following that, we had an interview with a team lead and an HR employee, which provided us with a better insight into the team structure. After the initial insights, we selected interviewees based on roles in order to capture every competence area within a team.

In terms of sample size, we followed Bryman et al.'s. (2019) advice and conducted interviews until saturation was reached. After ten interviews, we experienced that the new data did no longer suggest any new insights within the research topic. To conclude the data collection, we had a final interview with a senior manager who provided answers to more general questions regarding the structure of the company and administrative operations.

To create a holistic overview, we interviewed employees working in different job positions and employees working at the company for different lengths of time. Since the study aimed to analyze the relationship between organizational structure, control and autonomy, we interviewed six individual contributors, two team leaders, and three managers. Moreover, the interview participants work in different teams and at different locations, making it observative of internal impressions and differences in perception of the overall company. The interviewees were between 25-50 years old and had worked at the company for at least four months. The table below presents an overview of the conducted interviews.

Name of employee (pseudonyms)	Role within the company	Length of the interview	Date for interview
Sam	Team lead	60 mins	2022-03-28
Alice	HR	55 mins	2022-03-30
Maria	Quality Assurance	55 mins	2022-04-08
Emma	Designer	50 mins	2022-04-12
Marcus	Developer	55 mins	2022-04-12
Macy	Designer	60 mins	2022-04-12
Ted	Developer	60 mins	2022-04-19

Robin	Manager	55 mins	2022-04-19
Kim	Manager	50 mins	2022-04-20
Andrea	Team lead	55 mins	2022-04-28
Sara	Manager	45 mins	2022-05-06

3.5 Data Analysis

First, we aspired to develop a holistic understanding of the organizational structure in the context of the employees' perceptions of control and autonomy at the workplace. The challenge with qualitative study and semi-structured interviews is that it generates a large amount of data (Bryman et al., 2019). Thus, before starting the analysis process, we sorted the transcriptions of the interviews (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). By carefully reading the transcriptions, we highlighted different quotes from the transcriptions that were interesting based on the themes that were identified when constructing the interview guides, things that were repeated, and things that stood out from the existing literature. This gave us an initial overview of the material and helped us to further understand the empirical findings. During this process, we searched for relationships between our themes while reflecting on the literature. After initial sorting, we went back to the material, read the transcriptions again, and started a thematic sorting process based on Gubrium's and Holstein's (1997) "what's and how's". Since the study aimed to provide insights into employees' perspectives, we focused on the team member and team lead interviews to understand the perception of control and autonomy. Interviews with the managers were used to gain a greater understanding of the different concepts that the team members and team leaders were referring to. Finally, interpreting "how's" added a critical point of view since sometimes participants said one thing while meaning something else. However, we were not able to analyze "how's" in more detail due to the online environment and limited interview time. Hence, this analysis prioritized "what's" more than "how's".

These second-order themes were then transformed into overarching themes. After sorting the material, the material consisted of many categories and different quotes. To understand the perception of control and autonomy, we focused on reducing the material in line with Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018) recommendations. We reduced the material by adapting a categorical reduction

where categories that were less prominent and interesting in relation to previous research and the material were removed. The categories that were left after sorting and reducing the material were: *transparency, autonomy, teamwork, feedback, control from clients* and *normative control*.

Even though coding the material is appropriate to enable a deep analysis, it is also important to consider the shortcomings with coding the material. One aspect is the risk of losing the context and the social environment when coding the material (Bryman et al., 2017). Considering this, we have worked closely with the transcriptions to make sure that important factors of the social environment are not lost and also by providing the readers with a detailed description of the case company. In practice, we continuously reflected on statements that were used in the analysis in order to ensure the correct interpretation of the data. Lastly, we followed Rennstam and Wästerfors's (2018) recommendation on arguing for the material that was selected from the collected data.

3.6 Research Quality and Limitations

As with most research methods, certain limitations are important to address in order to consider the quality of the research. We examined various considerations in our study in order to address the requirement of credibility and to provide valuable insights for researchers and practitioners. Guba and Lincoln (1994; cited in Bryman et al., 2019) advise assessing qualitative research by the concepts of trustworthiness and authenticity. The concept of trustworthiness consists of four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Bryman et al., 2019). Credibility concerns to reflect the interviewees' social reality in line with their intentions (Bryman et al., 2019). In our case, we acknowledge the risk of facing credibility issues. To ensure the credibility of the study, we focused on validating concepts several times during the interview. By asking follow-up questions and reflecting back on the respondents' answers, we ensured that we interpreted the respondent's answers correctly. However, one possible limitation that is important to acknowledge was that the interviews were conducted in English, which was not the interviewees' native language. This could create a language barrier, and we may have been deprived of important nuances in descriptions.

Confirmability in qualitative research methods has been criticized, as there is a risk that the authors' biases influence what is observed and identified during data collection and coding (Bryman et al., 2019). To reduce the risk of biased interpretations and misunderstandings, we recorded and

transcribed all of the interviews. After that, both authors reviewed the material thoroughly. Throughout the research, we also considered questioning our own assumptions. Considering the transferability, we described the research context, case company, and interviewees as detailed as possible. However, due to preserving the anonymity of the company and the interviewees, some personal data was not shared in the study. We directed our findings towards case context and strived to refrain from generalizing our results. Dependability was considered mainly in this chapter by having a detailed explanation of how we selected the respondents, how the data was collected and what was the outline for the analysis.

3.7 Ethics and Confidentiality

In terms of ethics and confidentiality, we asked every participant for an allowance to record the interviews with them. We also made sure that they knew that both the company and their names would be anonymous in the study. We informed the participants that their participation would not be shared with anyone outside the study. This information was stated in the initial information posted on Appli's internal communication channel, in the email we sent to individuals on LinkedIn, and then at the beginning of the interview. To keep the interviewees anonymous, we have not shared the specific details about the interviewees, such as age and how long the participants have worked at the company. In addition, during the data analysis process, we carefully chose all statements and comments to make it less obvious who said what. We prioritized participants' confidentiality by not using too personal descriptions of the interviewees. Hence, the ethical consideration was maintained and reflected the whole time during the study.

4 Empirical Analysis

In this chapter, we analyze the empirical findings. The chapter is structured into five different themes. The first theme serves as an introduction to the organizational structure. Thereafter we present the findings regarding employees' perception of Appli's structure. The third theme presents the employee's perception of transparency and open communication at Appli. After that, we present the findings regarding autonomy and employees' perception of the balance between autonomy and control. In the last theme, we present the finding regarding the control influences as Appli.

4.1 Organizational structure at Appli

Appli is structured as a matrix organization meaning that it consists of multiple teams that are based on competence areas and each employee informs about their work process to several managers (Harris and Raviv, 2002). Combined with a matrix structure, they aspire to have a flat structure with few hierarchical levels. Therefore, this analysis regards Appli as an aspiring flat organization. Every team is based on the clients consisting of designers, developers, QAs, team leads and product leads that work for the specific client composing of different projects. Team leads and product leads work as facilitators for the daily operations, are responsible for the team's overall wellbeing, and communicate actively with the client. The team leads are responsible for planning and helping forward the project by running standup meetings, setting sprint-specific goals, conducting retrospectives, demos, check-in meetings and actively communicating about the work progress. All these activities hold professional descriptions that are commonly used in technology-oriented companies. Sprints are short project periods when the team sets a two-week plan. A retrospective conducts a reflection on the previous sprint and an improvement for the future. Demos are there to present the outcomes of the sprint to other teams or external partners. Lastly, standups or check-in meetings are daily sessions that support the coordination of everyday work.

Moreover, every employee has a personal manager based on the competence area who commonly works in a different team. This means that the team members within a team report to different managers. Managers take care of employees from a professional and organizational perspective. They are responsible for salary reviews, yearly performance appraisals, feedback sessions and professional support. The organizational operations are structured in a way that the edges of the daily teamwork and professional evaluations are separated. Employees are professionally evaluated

by external managers who are not present in the subordinate's daily work within the team. A project manager Kim reflects on the purpose of having the current structure:

I think the greatest thing about it is we separate personal growth from work performance. My conversations with the people I'm a manager for are more of helping them talking about how they can achieve their goals as professionals, and individuals. And don't have the pressure of having a client that has needs and things like that...So it's easier to focus on those things that we actually want to focus on. The downside is that I have less insight into their workflow. So, I have a harder time giving great feedback, because I don't observe their work. So it's more of a coaching mentorship role with managerial responsibility, than sort of a more traditional line manager type role.” - Kim

Kim’s reflection on his work stresses the specialty of being a manager at Appli and identifies differences compared to “traditional line manager” work. The comment is interesting since it provides a relevant overview of topics that we will touch upon through this analysis. The following analysis consists of findings regarding the aspiring flat organization and its connection to transparency, autonomy and feedback, and internal and external control mechanisms.

4.2 Employees' Perception of the Aspiring Flat Structure

Despite Appli's hierarchical layers, most employees consider the company to be flat. As the QA specialist Magdalena described, “there is no big hierarchy”. When asked questions regarding Appli’s structure and the team structure, the majority of the interviewees referred to the company as non-hierarchical and aspiring to be flat. This perception makes it interesting to explore why the employees perceive it as a flat structure. The team lead Andrea explains her view and perception of Appli’s structure:

I think they try to be flat because like in theory everyone loves a flat organization. But I don't think flat necessarily work 100%...they try to be flat, which evidently just results to them lacking structure and processes, and but yeah it's not 100% flat because we do still have managers and we still have, like, decisions has to go through these different steps. I don't know. Aspiring flat model.” - Andrea

Andrea's way of describing the organizational structure and use of words such as "try" and "aspiring" indicates her perception of a company that tries to be flat but is not taking action in all aspects. The comment also indicates that with the current structure, Appli lacks structure and processes. Andrea later mentions that lacking structure and processes affect employees' possibilities to implement some of their ideas. For example, she mentions that Appli supports an individual's willingness to learn and develop one's skills. Managers are identified to be behind the decision when it comes to matters of resources, availability and time. Andrea explained that "I just feel yeah, it kind of depends on, who's your manager or who, who you are". We may identify some informal influences that impact on the perception of control.

The perception of Appli being a fairly flat company, but at the same time highlighting the challenges, is reflected among several employees. The developer Ted reflected on the flat structure and related challenges:

As we are a very flat company, but we're also getting very big. So I really think that we won't be able, like a flat company [...] Everyone wanted a flat company. It's the best kind of company to talk to your boss directly. But it's also that you don't have the processes in place, for example, to have these hard talks, I don't want to talk directly to my boss saying my salary is shit. Like, I want to have someone who takes the conversation for me. So I think with a growing company, there's nothing wrong with having a more hierarchical company. - Ted

Interestingly, similar to Andrea's comment, the comment from Ted expresses a general view that a flat structure is something everyone wants in "theory", while simultaneously highlighting the need for some hierarchical processes. The comment also indicates the view of a flat structure supports open communication between subordinates and managers. This concept of open communication will be analyzed later in this analysis. It is also interesting that Ted would rather have a middleman handle difficult negotiations with his manager on sensitive issues such as salary. We may consider this as something employees would value as they would escape the uncomfortable feeling of having "hard talks". Hence, a sense of hierarchy is desired in order to address administrative and operative issues and processes. As such, it generates more formality to the organization's structure. Moreover, Ted's comment demonstrates that Appli is growing, creating new challenges for organizing and

structuring the company. Some of the strengths are still initiated in the flat organization. Another developer, Marcus, reflects on Appli's strength of having a flat structure:

It's very flat. Very non-hierarchical, which is a good thing... to enable change and feel empowered in doing so, on to the feeling of ownership... I think that it might be the company's biggest strength as a whole. That does not mean that everything is perfect within it. And there are of course parts and processes which are less transparent and more controlled so to speak. But the overall ambition is there to have it be transparent at least, and that's very communicated by the CEO. - Marcus

The comment first of all indicates a positive view of the flat structure. Marcus highlights that having a flat company increases the feeling of ownership and the ability to act upon changes. The comment also states that transparency is communicated by the CEO, which could indicate that they aspire to create a transparent culture. Furthermore, the comment is interesting because it indicates a perception of a flat company and simultaneously highlights that some parts are less transparent and more controlled.

One of the company's values is *trust* which is implemented through the concept of psychological safety. Sara, a senior manager, stressed, "we're focusing on trying to build a very open atmosphere where you can feel secure or safe". It indicates that Appli aims to create a safe space, where everyone shares their thoughts and feelings openly. The designer Emma reflected on the psychological safety environment by stating that the company's culture consists of networking and talking to other people. She experienced that asking for help from other teams is a natural way of communicating and sharing knowledge around the company. Hence, it may indicate that Appli tends to prioritize communication and cares about employees' feelings. Similarly, another designer stressed:

I think Appli cares a lot. From the individual level of your manager, but also from the company level, I think they put a lot of effort, I think, because they've seen the struggle of let's be real, having people that drop out because of burnout. - Macy

It is possible to interpret Macy's comment as an expression of appreciation for Appli's working conditions. It can also indicate that employees' experience of having care, open communication and

transparent relationships may influence the perception of a flat structure. Managers and employees seem to share mutual values that may boost employees' perceptions.

However, we found that sustaining an open and psychological safety environment might be challenging due to hybrid work settings. Some interviewees described having a challenging time communicating to other people about what was happening in their life and how they were handling the work amount. A team lead, Sam, who is in charge of taking care of a team, reflected on the hybrid work setting:

And for me to be able to see what the person on-site is doing versus the person online is very difficult because the person online, I wouldn't have like this, you know, I'm not going to see them in the hallway. But I normally try to like book some time with them. And [ask] "Hey, how's it going? How are you doing? Are you happy?" I don't know. - Sam

Sam's words indicate that working on-site and remote creates different social bubbles. The work-related topics are discussed online, but the additional internal cultural activities appear less transparent for employees working full-time remotely. Additionally, remote workers may have harder times building transparent and communicative relationships. Many interviewees stressed the value of communication, but we noticed that hybrid work settings may have created communication and transparency challenges. The developer Maria reflected on the communication in a hybrid work setting:

Communicating before was much easier when people were around, so you could just come over to the desk and ask stuff, but right now it feels like a no big deal to reach out to someone and write to them, and ping them, other people have easier, to ignore different questions and stuff.- Maria

Maria's comment suggests that perceptions of the transparent company have experienced some changes due to the increase in working remotely. She stresses that due to hybrid work, people are less approachable and tend to ignore work-related communication. Hence, we may identify some tension from aspiration to be flat and transparent, but not establishing clear processes. Furthermore, we will analyze what characteristics the employees associated with a flat structure and how the flat structure impacts the perception of autonomy and control.

4.3 Transparency Fostering the Course of a Flatter Organization

We noticed that several employees highlighted the open communication and transparency between the team members, team leads and managers, contributing to employees' perception of a flat structure at Appli. A manager at Appli highlighted that "any information that doesn't need to be secret should be available to everybody". Appli has a principle that conversation about work should not be private since the information that people may share could be useful and relevant for others in different teams.

When interviewees reflected on transparency and open communication, several employees highlighted the value of the structure of having a team lead and a manager working in another team. Sam, a team leader, reflects on her role as a team leader and how it impacts team members' openness to share:

You have less power, but then it also makes you equal so people are more open to you... It's more transparent and the team is not afraid of you because, I mean their salary doesn't depend on me, for instance. So they're very open to say how they feel, and to complain and to show their feelings in a nice environment than in other cultures where you have this hierarchy. - Sam

Based on Sam's comment, it appears having a team leader on an equal level with the team members creates a safe and open working environment where employees can talk about how they are feeling. We interpret that Sam believes her lack of authority over the team members influences the team member's transparency due to their feeling of a reduced risk of negatively impacting their work position. The team lead's role focuses on coordinating the daily operations, which seems to impact internal relationships and transparency within a team. Furthermore, we noted that separating team leads from managers creates communication channels for different types of issues, which is illustrated in Emma's comment:

I have my manager and I have my team lead that I can also talk to if I have some issue. Like sometimes maybe I have, it's like a tiny issue, but it bothers me. Or maybe I don't want to bring it up to the manager because it's like it's not a big deal. Then I can talk to my team lead and he can advise - Emma

The comment indicates that the structure of having a team lead and a manager might support transparency by providing different types of relationships, which are valuable for various kinds of issues. Emma seems to experience social support from different sources depending on her issues, which seems to create greater transparency. A central point of this process is that individuals feel safe to open up about their concerns. However, before talking to the manager, she seems to evaluate the size of the issue and decide accordingly about the concerns she addresses to the manager. Later on, Emma reflected that not being in the same team as the manager fosters her openness and willingness to share information with her manager.

I think I'm more willing to share or more open to sharing since he's not there to see it. Okay, I have to provide for more people but if he was there, maybe I wouldn't share it, or I wouldn't express it because it's like, "oh, you were there, you saw it", but that doesn't mean that they know the way I thought. If he wasn't there then I can express it in more detail. I think it just makes me more willing to share more details. - Emma

The comment is interesting because it indicates that not working daily with the manager creates a greater willingness to share. However, compared to Sam's perception, where Sam reflected on openness to share with the team lead, Emma's statement indicates a greater willingness to be open to the manager. The reason behind this seems to be the fact that the manager is not there daily to supervise. The comment could also indicate that the relationship between the employee and manager is less controlling and more based on the employee's willingness to share about their work because of their own will. However, having the manager in another team, could increase the indirect control from the manager from the point of view that the employees feel more open to sharing about their work. The openness to share could result in the manager having more insight into the subordinates' work. One could also argue that at the same time, it reduces the feeling of direct control because the manager is not there daily to supervise the employee's work. This openness and transparency could lead to managers having better control over their employee's work and feelings, while the feeling of control from the manager is reduced.

Moreover, we noticed that personal relationships might enhance open relationships and transparency. This is identified in the communication within the team and with the managers. A developer named Ted was able to provide an explanation for transparency by saying: "I share everything with my team, what I feel. But it really has to do with personal connections rather than roles." This indicates that personal factors such as personality are crucial for sustaining transparent

culture. A developer, Marcus, said about his manager: “I like him as a person” Thus, personal relationships are fundamental on both levels: team lead who coordinates and managers who support employees' personal development. Furthermore, the implementation of a flat and transparent organization is emphasized in cross-functional teams. Ted stressed, “go to people that you trust, and to people that you know can help you, will help you regardless of position.” His comment demonstrates that trust and open communication also enhances professionally supporting relationships with other teams and team members.

However, while the majority of the employees highlighted the perception of a transparent company, several employees simultaneously described that the employees are inadequate at giving feedback to each other. The team lead Sam explained the lack of feedback culture:

I realized that they don't have a culture of feedback, which is terrible. But they have been doing well. And I think that partly why they have been doing well is because they are very flat. So people can actually talk to each other. - Sam

In this quote, Sam states that the company does not have a culture of feedback but that the flat structure has helped Appli to create communication between the employees. Thus it reinforces the idea that having a flat organization is related to more accessible communication between the employees. However, the comment might imply that the company does not have processes and structure for giving feedback. Interestingly, among the interviewees' the majority emphasized the importance of feedback and wished to receive it more in the future. One could also question how transparent and open the company really is since the majority referred to not receiving enough feedback.

4.3 Autonomy

During the interviews, the respondents were asked questions about their daily work, how they plan their work, how they set goals and how their work is evaluated. When reflecting on this, several employees highlighted the feeling of autonomy and referred to having a constant dialogue with the team instead of having “hard measurements”. When interviewees talked about autonomy and freedom, it appeared that aspects such as having the freedom to work from home, not having any hard performance measurements, planning the sprints together with the team and having flexibility

within the sprint planning increased the feeling of autonomy. The developer Ted reflected about autonomy:

Well, what I love about Appli, and all of what I've talked about with other people who don't have these hard measurements, is that it's truly free in a way. But of course, you have to make sure that you do what the customer wants you to do. If you do that in time, they shouldn't care about it. In my opinion, they should just know that you will get it done. And you can work whenever you want. You can work in the evening if you want to. And that's a lot of the time what happens because we don't have these hard working hours... it's very freeing in some way. - Ted

The comment from Ted, first of all, indicates a perception that the environment at Appli is “truly free in a way”. From the comment, we note that the responsibility to decide when to work creates a feeling of freedom and autonomy. Employees described being independent in the way of planning and getting on with work tasks. From this comment, we also note that the absence of hard measurement seems to influence the feeling of autonomy. The perception of not having any “hard measurements” was generally described positively by the employees. Moreover, it is interesting that Ted highlights, “but of course, you have to make sure that you do what the customer wants you to do”. By saying this, Ted indicates that the client’s needs also influence control.

Moreover, we identified a difference between autonomy at the individual and team levels. Whereas some employees refer to their individual work, some refer to the team’s autonomy at Appli. Several employees stated that every team has the power to decide how they want to organize their work and how they want to coordinate their job. Marcus’ statement, “There is not an Appli. Only project by project”, implies that every team has its own culture and routines. Similarly, Ted strengthens the perception that every team serves as its own entity:

We work only with this product, and no other team will ever interfere with us. So we kind of create our own way of working, which is nice, because we can meet the customer's needs specifically for each product. But it's also that we don't have a standardized way of working towards the customer. And not internally, everyone works in a different way. Which I think could be a bit weird as we're growing. - Ted

Both comments are interesting due to their emphasis on teamwork and how the teams have autonomy. The comment implies that the different teams at Appli have the freedom to organize how the team will work in order to meet the client's needs. Hence, the fact that the company has no standardized way of working may address the sense of autonomy and creativity in each team. When it comes to creativity, we can only speculate positive outcomes, but not provide evidence since it was not in the scope of the research. Moreover, Ted thinks that it is “nice” to work independently as a team but appears to be concerned about the future of the company. He may suggest, as the company grows, it would be reasonable to generate more standards for coordination. We consider this a possible future implementation, however, keeping, in mind the concept of a flat organization.

Moreover, the importance of balancing autonomy and control is identified in several interviews. Whereas having autonomy is reflected as something valuable, several interviewees emphasized the importance of also having some control and coordination. For example, when employees reflected upon autonomy, we noted that several employees also highlighted the value of having some activities that support and guide them. The developer Emma expresses her view of how Appli balances autonomy, structure, and support:

I feel like for now that it provides a very good balance of like if I talk about autonomous, it gives me flexibility to work, but there is a bit of a structure also on the side and there is a lot of support around me if I need it like... So for now I think this one has provided the best balance. Between being very flexible, hands-on support but also having some structure. -
Emma

While the comment highlights the autonomy in the company, it also indicates that Appli has processes that give support to the employees. It also implies that they have some sort of structure that could be seen as a way of steering the employees. The comment is interesting because it demonstrates that processes that could be seen as controlling are perceived as support rather than increasing the feeling of being controlled. A pattern of the perception of having processes providing support rather than reducing the sense of autonomy is found in several other interviews. One example of a process that could be perceived as giving support or control is the employees' weekly one-on-one meetings with their managers. Macy reflects on the purpose of the one-on-one meetings:

This is my manager and I can talk to her about anything. And she's gonna just come to help me, like her job is to help me and I really appreciate this, so I kept that, you know, like once a week thing since the beginning. - Macy

The comment strengthens the perception of having processes that support the employees. The comment might demonstrate a perception of one-on-one meetings as support rather than as a way of controlling the employees. We noted a cohesion that several employees understood the one-on-one meetings to be something to support them. For example, Emma stated, “the role is very much to guide and just check-in and make sure that everything is good and that it's going well”. Perceiving such activities as support rather than control could lead to an increase in the perception of autonomy.

However, we also identify another perspective of the autonomy in the company. The team lead Andrea reflected on the lack of processes to let people be autonomous:

We like encourage autonomy, but there's no process of like encouraging. Like, “yes, you can do that”. Or “if you are interested in something and you want to, go and educate yourself, you can do that”. But then there's no process to how we go about those things... I just feel like we aspire to be autonomous. - Andrea

In this quote, we identify how the lack of processes may limit the possibility of being autonomous in the sense of having opportunities to develop and grow. We interpret that while the company gives autonomy to the individuals through the absence of “hard measurement”, allowing them to decide when and where to work and giving the team autonomy to organize their teamwork, the autonomy may be limited due to the lack of processes within the company. The comment is also interesting because it indicates a perception that Appli rhetorically encourages autonomy, but that does not reflect reality.

Moreover, the dilemma between control and autonomy is also identified in several interviewees. Ted reflected on the downside of autonomy and highlighted why some control is needed:

So the flip of the coin of having autonomy is that you can slack for sure. And it's very easy as a developer to exaggerate what you have done. Because a lot of the people that wants to measure you, don't know enough technical stuff, to know for a fact that you've done anything

that's valuable. Because as a developer, you can talk around it so much. So that's something if you don't measure it, or at least evaluate your work, you don't have to hard measure it, but you should soft measure it often. Otherwise, I think you could slack off, for sure - Ted

The quote from Ted is interesting since it examines the value of balancing autonomy and control. While giving autonomy is desirable, the value of having some sort of control and evaluation is needed. It is interesting that Ted explains that it is easy to exaggerate about one's performance and that it is easy to "slack off" if the performance is not measured or evaluated. The quote also implies the challenges of measuring work performance when working with complex work tasks. The view that it is difficult to measure the performance is stated by most of the interviewees. Ted also refers to a distinction between hard and soft measurements, where he seems to prefer soft measurements. With this in mind, the next section will analyze the control at Appli.

4.4 Control at Appli

4.4.1 Teamwork Creates the Need for Coordination

In order to understand the perception of control at Appli, we asked questions regarding employee performance measures. When asking questions regarding how the employee's work performance is controlled, evaluated, and reported, the recurring perception is that Appli does not focus on those types of "things". As mentioned earlier, most of the employees referred to not having any "hard measurements" at Appli. Although the employees perceive that they have a lot of autonomy and that no hard measurements are used at Appli, we have observed that there exists control at Appli. The control we have identified is the synchronization and coordination sessions the employees partake in, where they update each other on the progress of their work. Every other week, the teams together do sprint planning to decide what they will work on during the next two weeks. After every sprint, the teams organize retrospectives to evaluate the sprint and demos to show others what each team has done during the past two weeks. Other activities that coordinate and control employees' work are the daily morning meetings, afternoon check-outs, and one-on-one meetings with the managers. The employees refer to having a continuous dialogue with both their manager, team leads, and team members. One reason the employees do not perceive the previously mentioned activities as control could be that coordination and control become such a natural and presumed part of their work due to the mutual dependencies between the team members' work. Macy, a designer,

expresses her perception of control and the natural requirement to communicate continually about what they are doing and what they will be doing in the future.

Report? I talk to people. We don't really have an established system. So it's about everybody. How they do it better. -Macy

Macy's comment indicates a perception that the control at Appli is mainly based on coordination and communication. We believe that communication is not perceived as control by the employees, as they consider synchronization and coordination to be such a central and implied part of their work. It appears that there is no standard operating procedure at Appli when it comes to reporting about one's work. Employees described having various meetings for that reason. Meetings, however, tend to serve different purposes and follow certain structures. The planned meetings and restricted time in some meetings left some employees feeling they were not receiving feedback for their work. For instance, the team lead, Andrea commented:

As an individual, I don't really get feedback to be honest, and that's something I've requested or I've talked to my manager about it because I realized that there isn't really a process or format for it. We have a retrospective, but the retrospective is more focused on a Sprint like what we've done in this Sprint then, like oh, "I would like to do this", so I would like to have longer standups. - Andrea

This comment indicates the current meetings do not facilitate feedback. Whereas the meeting indicates facilitating coordination between the team members, it seems like Appli lacks processes and format for providing feedback. The comment indicates that meetings are there for other purposes rather than evaluations and feedback. Her suggestion of having longer meetings would provide the possibility to give and receive more feedback. The perception of lacking processes and structure for feedback is shared among several interviewees. Marcus reflected over the importance of having processes and structure for feedback:

The default is not giving feedback in any place ever, like of course people will say small things, but in order to do it in a good and more regular fashion, that is something you need to work on in any organization or company. - Marcus

This comment demonstrates the importance of having processes and structure for feedback. The comment might imply that regardless of how the relationships are within the company and how transparent they are, if there are no processes and structure for giving and receiving feedback, the feedback will not be efficient.

At the same time we note the perception of having lacking processes for feedback, we observe that the employees generally talked about having many meetings every day. We noticed that some of the meetings were perceived as not as important as others. Ted stressed: “Having many meetings it's just a meeting about nothing basically.” We may interpret those meetings as something systematic and controlled part of the work. It is interesting that employees highlighted the importance of communication but experienced some of the meetings as a waste of time. We may suggest that people were willing to discuss their work-specific tasks, but it was perceived as something irrelevant whenever it was about general topics. Sam reflected, “Sometimes you go to a meeting and there was nothing for you.” It might indicate that mainly the meetings were perceived as coordinated situations that were experienced as a coercive function of the company. Thus, it may affect individuals’ perception of autonomy since those meetings may limit employees’ time to perform their own work. It might indicate that mainly the meetings are perceived as coordination; it can also, in some aspects, be perceived as control. As a result, it may lead to coercive control from the managerial side. We may interpret those meetings as an informal way of influencing employees’ work performance.

4.4.2 Control Through Values

In responding to questions about how employees' job performance is evaluated, we found that most employees refer to a twice-a-year appraisal called the “impact model”. The HR worker Alice stated, “We don't have so many metrics, we are more like an impact model”. The managers we interviewed all shared a similar description and purpose behind the impact model. Sara, a senior manager, described the impact model as:

We use something we called impact model, which is a tool to talk about development. It's not really a tool for setting salaries, but it's to like, kind of explain what we think is important, what we value at Appli so that people working here can understand, okay, if I do this, then

that's value. If I do that, maybe that's not so valuable. Maybe I should like trying to find the path” - Sara

Sara's description of the impact model indicates that Appli uses the impact model to steer the employees' actions to align the company's objectives. Similarly, the two other managers described the purpose behind the impact model as the “basis for the employees' future development plans” and “telling everybody in the organization what the company values, what types of behavior and what types of activities.” It appears that Appli's informal influencing is centered around components from the impact model that considers the company's values and individuals' interests. The impact model is based on values divided into two sections, leadership and expertise. Individuals' are self-disciplined to set the goals that are perceived as the most important ones based on the things Appli values. We interpret this as a process of aligning the core values of the company with the individual's action to achieve the company's objectives by supporting employees' self-development. In other words, it seems that Appli uses a “softer” side of control that intends to help employees reach goals and feel accomplished by measuring their impact both on an individual and collective level. Interestingly, the perceived purpose and the perception of the model are understood differently among employees. The QA specialist Maria reflected on the impact model on various levels by supporting a similar vision as the manager:

I don't think it's possible to measure it actually... That's why we have this impact model basically, which is supposed not to be measurable. You shouldn't be keeping score in any way with this impact model, so it kind of makes sense. I would say it's not about collecting points, it's about how to develop myself or how do I add to my team as well? And they are different kind of ways to add to the company by, you know, participating, like doing interviews and so on and those kinds of side things that cumulate together. - Maria

When Maria talked about the impact model, she emphasized personal development factors but also the impact each individual brought to their team and the company. The comment also implies that Appli does not just focus on an individual's work performance, they also value the individual's impact on the team and on the culture of the company. Alice reflected on the purpose of the impact model “Okay, have you done impact for yourself? Or do you impact your team? Or do you impact the company?” We interpret that through the impact model, Appli wants to influence the employees to make a greater impact by aligning individuals' work to the company's objectives. A designer

Emma provided an example of how she gained support by applying some aspects of the impact model.

We sit down and review it and see if I have been presenting what I have been doing, and telling him [manager] about what I have been working on. Then he could also be like OK, so now for the next impact model part it looks all well. My homework, now, I'm going to think about if this is good and if this is developing naturally. What is the next step that I want to learn? In which direction I'm going to go? - Emma

Emma refers to “homework” as an active addition to her daily work that helps her to reflect on personal “impact” goals. We might consider her approach as a self-imposed action that possibly benefits employees’ performance. In addition, several employees mentioned similar impressions by referring to supportive managers, the concept of ownership and self-leading behavior. However, some interviewees demonstrated a rather undesirable reaction of the impact model. Maria stated, “It's much better, if we give feedback to each other within the team rather than just wait once a year and hear it”. Her comment shows that she would prefer the feedback coming from her team members regularly, then from the manager through the yearly appraisal. Another example is that several employees questioned the reason behind using the impact model. The developer Macy reflected, “I'm not super sure if it's done with the benefit of the employee in mind”. The comment from Macy might imply skepticism behind the purpose of using the impact model. We interpret that Macy rather perceives the purpose of the impact model to be something used for the benefit of the company. This perception could create resistance among the employees in the long term. Furthermore, we also noted confusion about what is measured by the impact model. Andrea explains her view of the impact model:

I hate the impact model. I really think it just breeds more uncertainty and nobody really knows what it will be like. It's supposed to be a fair model, so people are based on the same sort of metrics, but it's not really and it is very, I would say it becomes very individual based on who gets to be the judge of the impact model and I think it's very, yeah, I don't know. It's very hard to understand, like, so did I reach this or what do I need to do to them, create the impact I need to? - Andrea

The comment from Andrea and the use of the word “hate” implies a strong dislike regarding the impact model. The part “create the impact I need to”, strengthens the perception that creating an

impact is valued at Appli. This could indicate the influence of the organization's norms that are set for development reasons. The quote is also interesting since it stresses the complexity of measuring one's impact, which can create a feeling of unfairness. The designer Macy further strengthens this confusion and uncertainty by ironically saying:

“It's not very exact. It feels very, like fluffy. Like, it's not like math, it's not like two and two is four, it's like two or three is three.” - Macy

We suppose from these comments that the input of each employee is not in alignment with their work performance since the result of evaluation might be perceived as something subjective and unfair. Furthermore, based on our interviews, we may assume that impact models state general and technical expertise to assess employees' work performance. Some interviewees pointed out that the model creates expectations toward an individual's performance. This is explained in a comment from Marcus:

It's a salary process thing. It's there to say this is what Appli values. When we decide like, how you do this, is what we value at the company. And the more you do these things, the more we will reward you with a higher salary... The biggest thing is that it's transparent what the company values. And then you can adapt to that. - Marcus

In our analysis of this statement, we note that Marcus acknowledges the expectations Appli has communicated to its employees. It was also the opinion of some employees who had worked at Appli long-term that the impact model affected the salary review process.

4.4.3 Control through Clients

In addition to the previously mentioned impact model, we observed another factor that adds to control at Appli. In our perception, clients Appli works with may represent external control forces. This perception is based on the fact that many employees highlighted the importance of sharing work performance and work progress for the clients. The designer Maria described her intention to make sure that the client is aware of the teams work performance:

You want to have something, to show something, you know not really just in the code, but you know something that they [the clients] can see and click and feel, so they want to kind of present the results that we did something this sprint. But maybe there has not been a lot of

work with refactorization. Something is like just in the code behind that needs to be done to make the product good, but something that's not visible really for it. So for them it looks like we did nothing for two weeks, basically because they don't see their results, but we still do stuff and it's a lot of research.” - Maria

The comment stresses the importance and desire to have something tangible to show the clients. We may interpret this as the constant need to reassure partners of the work progress. Later on Maria stressed the control and power of the client:

It's all about money and politics and who takes charge of what and who is more important and so on. And we just wanted our product, you know we are just the simple people behind. - Maria

When considering how Maria is talking about the client, we acknowledge the power and control the clients might have. Thus, the comments indicate the perception of indirect control when working for the client. It bridges two sides, “those kinds of two sides sometimes can be challenging because we want to show something for the client, but we still need to do our job.” In Maria’s opinion, teams juggle between conforming to clients' needs and producing good quality products. Emma further elaborates on this when reflecting on how the client's needs sometimes do not align with the person or company's values.

We got some new branding from our client for one of the powerful new projects. It wasn't the best, we thought that that wasn't really what our the product is going, and it wasn't really aligning with it. So we said, “hey, we really want to pitch something else, because this doesn't align with the project or the product and it's a fair line with Appli considered quality”, and they were like “OK, You have two days.” What are you serious? OK, I have to cover with all this?... And then at the end of it, I had something to show. I didn't think it was good because two days is not enough time for this kind of thing. - Emma

The comment is interesting because it indicates a client’s power over the individual’s work. It demonstrates the tension between wanting to meet the client's need and still working in line with one's own values. We perceive it as the relationship with the client is about obtaining acceptance in order to succeed as a company. Due to external client needs, Appli is obligated to follow the schedule of the partner’. As a result, it reduces the sense of autonomy individually as well as on the

organizational level. Hence, the monitoring is present informally and indirectly. Sam's reflection strengthens the control the clients have on Appli regarding how the clients are impacting Appli's evaluation:

My number one thing right now is that the client is extremely happy. And they have given us business. And we get flowers all the time. But if I see the team is like this is not this is not performing well. There's a lot of time wasted, there's a lot of resources wasted, there's a lot of waiting time, there's a lot of discussions on long tickets that nobody wants to take. There's a lot of shit that is happening that shouldn't be happening. But everybody has an excuse. Why? Because the client is happy. And we have money. And I think that this happens a lot, like way more than we think. Because the thing is that the client doesn't know how tech works. - Sam

This comment from the team leader is interesting in many different aspects. First, it indicates that the controlling mechanism at Appli is based on the customers' needs and satisfaction. The customer, Sam's team, is working with is happy and gives Appli acknowledgment and confirmation to Appli that they are satisfied with their job. However, Sam perceives that the team is not actually performing and gives examples of why she does not think they are performing. Thus, in this case, the customer's satisfaction and confirmation seem to be the steering factor that determines if the employees are doing a good job or not. The quote also emphasizes the challenge of measuring work performance when working with complex tasks.

Lastly, even though employees perceived Appli as a "free" and not a controlling environment, some employees talk about micromanaging from the managers and team lead due to pressure from clients. Macy reflects on micromanaging from her manager and team lead during meetings with clients:

However, there's been multiple times that both my design lead and Team Lead or probably have been like, asking me to share with them what I'm going to present and how I'm going to present it...there's been multiple times where I'm literally being asked, like, "put these words, say this and that, like, you know, like, I'm like, don't do that, like, because then I just become a robot. - Macy

When analyzing Macy's comment, we identify a higher level of managerial control when in contact with the client. The comment indicates the desire to have something valuable to show the clients. Thus, this could indicate the power the clients have over Appli's work.

5 Discussion

The purpose of this chapter is to present our discussion, where we connect our empirical results to previous research on the topics of the study. The chapter begins to discuss Appli's flat structure and how it influences the perception of autonomy and control. The discussion analyzes these concepts through the lens of transparency, communication, coordination, feedback, normative control, and external control mechanisms. We pay attention to individual, team and organizational levels influences on the interplay between control and autonomy. Secondly, we reflect on their work tasks with cooperative and normative aspects of the phenomenon. Lastly, we discuss external control influences.

5.1 Deconstruction of Autonomy and Control in Aspiring Flat Organization

Following our research question, we identified dynamical tension in the perception of autonomy and control. Appli's aspiration of having a flat organization created multiple influencing factors that optimized the ambiguous understanding of autonomy and control. In addition to knowledge intensity, client centricity, and customization, Appli symbolized internal normative control mechanisms that shaped the company (Cardinal et al., 2017). The autonomy that is given to employees is traditionally perceived as self-determined activity, but there are always some pressured and coerced environmental forces that formulate the intentions and behavior of employees (Deci and Ryan, 1987). In the case of Appli, employees thought they were autonomous because they were able to form daily work routines individually as well as together with the team, and the company promoted the freedom of not measuring performance and exploiting the workforce by hard monitoring mechanisms. Appli strives to be autonomous and transparent but instead demonstrates a lack of structure and processes. Appli may provide less control on behavior and output by giving employees the freedom to tackle problems and work as they wish, but the interpersonal relations strive for adapting to the norms of the company (Langfred and Rockmann, 2016; Ouchi, 1979). It is identified that the knowledge workers are usually less controlled because of the comprehensive nature of the work, which makes it challenging to link to input and output control (Frenkel et al., 1995). The complexity of control is therefore revised due to a changing environment and ambiguity of the work (Cardinal et al., 2004; Alvesson, 2001).

5.2 Uniting Interpersonal Relationships Through Transparency

As a result of an aspiring flat company, we have identified transparency and open communication as interesting characteristics shaping the identification of the flat structure. In line with Auger's (2014) research, communicative transparency was something Appli implemented in daily work practices. Auger's findings (2014) suggest that when implementing communicative transparency in organizations', it unravels trust and positive behavioral intentions. It was something Appli implemented in the culture. This type of addition to the Appli's culture sets certain symbolic and material expectations to the quality of performance (Willmott, 1993). By being more transparent, we believe that the feeling of top-down decision-making is less prevalent, which is associated with flat organizations (Simon, 1997; Blau and Scott, 2003). Employees demonstrated the "willing to share more details" and "trust" as expressions of their relationships in the company. However, we noted that transparent culture was actively promoted by managers who might have influenced employees' perceptions. Managers' informal status have a great impact on employees' perceptions (Simon, 1997). Identified informal influencing aimed to win the "hearts and minds" (Peters & Waterman, 1982, p. 17) of employees through transparent relationships with managers and teams was a prominent finding of this study. Employees' reflections on interpersonal relationships showed the importance of various interpretations. However, if the employees' behavior was not aligned with the company values, it was possible that the employee would face the consequences. One interviewee noted: "it kind of depends on, who's your manager or who, who you are". When there is too much transparency, it might backfire in distrust, resistance and increased control (Haesevoets, 2019; Holtz et al., 2020; Fleming & Spicer, 2003).

5.2.1 Transparency Between Team-member, Team lead and Manager

We noted that the structure of having a manager who is working in another team and a team lead without personnel-related responsibilities reduces the feeling of direct supervision. Thus, we argue that the managerial work is perceived to focus on the individual's professional development more rather than daily output and behavior control (Ouchi 1977, Cardinal et al., 2004). It is caused by the ambiguous understanding of "knowledge work" since inputs, outputs and the act of work are united (Frenkel et al., 1995) making it challenging to monitor employees' performance through the use of metrics. Additionally, the knowledge work is identified as innovative, solution-driven, and valued for its quality rather than quantity (Alvesson, 2004; Frenkel et al., 1995; Winslow & Bramer, 1994).

Still, one activity that we identified as managerial control was the employees' weekly one-on-one meetings with the managers. Employees described the one-on-one meetings in a positive light, with one saying about the manager, "her job is to help me, and I really appreciate this", and the purpose of the meetings was described as "to guide me". We interpret that the one-on-one meetings are generally perceived as supporting, helping the employees achieve autonomy, rather than a way of controlling (Deci & Ryan, 1987).

From a managerial perspective, the transparency and willingness to share could increase the manager's control over the employees in the sense that the employees are more transparent and share more about their work and feelings. However, the few hierarchical levels and emphasizing transparency are demonstrated to result in a lack of processes and structure for different kinds of issues. One employee said that the company does not have any processes for "these hard talk" and referred to the example, "I don't want to talk directly to my boss saying my salary is shit". This contradicts the emphasis on a transparent relationship between the employee and manager, making it less transparent (Haesevoets, 2021). We can identify informal hierarchical tension between employees and the manager regardless of Appli's aspiration to maintain flat structure.

5.2.2 Work Environment and Transparency

Transparency was also reflected in the team members' relationships and in the work environment. One employee mentioned that "the overall ambition is there to have it be transparent at least, and that's very communicated by the CEO". Furthermore, we observed that the company tries to establish a culture of transparency by keeping conversations open and accessible for everyone. We, therefore, identify that the company is attempting to create a transparent environment through a top-down approach. Thus, the attempt could be seen as a way of creating a norm within the organization with the expectation that employees will follow the norm of being transparent (Kunda, 1992). Appli emphasized the implementation of psychological safety that is based on supporting a respectful attitude towards other people's competence, genuine interest in other people, support for constructive feedback, and skill in handling conflicts and confrontations (Edmondson, 1999). Based on earlier studies, individuals are more likely to experience psychological safety when their interpersonal relationships with other colleagues are trustful and supportive (Kahn, 1990). We found that psychological safety was demonstrated in comments such as "I share everything with my

team”. Psychological safety was embraced on various levels of the company and employees seemed to value and accept the implementation of this concept. However, one can argue its trustworthiness since the accuracy of social judgments is often questionable (Todorov et al., 2015). Moreover, we interpreted that interpersonal relationships can differ depending on the team, competence and seniority. The following statement, “any information that doesn’t need to be secret should be available to everybody” indicated the tension regarding ethical behavior that is expected in the workplace (Haesevoets, 2019; Palanski et al., (2011)). We did not identify direct consequences of this feature, however, it was detected sometimes in the cynical and ironic answers. Participants gave examples of complex situations from which it was possible to interpret some cynicism. Hence, we were able to identify some informal tensions due to the pressure of being transparent. Findings indicated that transparency created uncertainty in the coordinating practices and feedback.

5.3 Identifying Autonomy Characteristics from the Tension of Control

5.3.1 Interrelation Between Autonomy and Control When Working in a Team

We identified that employees’ perception of autonomy was described to be high because of cross-functional teams’ independence to organize their work. The traditional definition of autonomy refers to the freedom, independence, and discretion the employee has when planning and executing his/hers job (Hackman & Oldham, 1976). At Appli, the autonomy that we identified was apparent in the team’s freedom when organizing their teamwork. As one employee mentioned, “we kind of create our own way of working”. Referring to Hackman and Oldham's (1976) definition of autonomy, we note that independence is first and foremost apparent in the autonomy the teams have, as one employee stated, "no other team will ever interfere with us". The autonomy feature was also identified as a function to plan the sprints together and focus on the constant coordination instead of having any “hard measurement.”

We identified that while the dependencies create a need for coordination, it also means that the individual worker needs to have a broader range of control that is beyond one’s work tasks (Langfred and Rockmann, 2016). Sprint planning and constant updates on colleagues’ work progress are identified as ways to balance autonomy and control since everyone gains control and

insight into each other's progress while the work progress is aligned to each other. The control is embedded in social ties between the team members. We, therefore, argue that the dependencies the workers have on each other when working in a cross-functional team make the interplay between autonomy and control more complex to distinguish.

The dependency the team members have on each other's work creates a natural need for coordination and control to align with each other. We, therefore, argue that this dependence makes the interplay between autonomy and control more complex. According to Mintzberg (1979), work can be coordinated without direct supervision and instead focuses on mutual adjustment. We identified that working as a team made the acceptance of controlling activities greater due to the natural need for coordination. The control and coordination within the team was achieved through sprint planning, daily check-in and check-out, retrospectives meetings, and demos. The control that was apparent at Appli was not primarily based on the manager's action, which Cardinal et al. (2010) define as control. Instead, it is based on mutual coordination within the team, which could be seen as peer-control (Barker, 1993). As such, peer-based normative control is a state of motivation in self-managed teams where individuals feel influenced by their teammates through a combination of social inclusion and internalization (Stewart et al., 2012). According to Barker (1993), self-managing teams can increase their control by creating their own normative rules that are more influential than the traditionally hierarchical and bureaucratic control. The willingness to have constant dialogue and coordination activities could both be seen as a prerequisite for working in a team, but also be seen as normative rules within the team. As an individual, the desire to be part of a group motivates him/her to pursue goals endorsed by other members and to avoid behaviors that do not advance accepted group goals (Sorrels and Kelley, 1984). As Edenius and Styhre (2009) argue, normative control does not always have to emanate from management but is instead embedded in norms, values, and procedures. In the case of Appli it is based on self-discipline and integration to project-specific cultures. Stressing one interviewee's comment, "There is not an Appli. Only project by project" generates discussion around team culture rather than organizational culture.

5.3.2 Lack of Feedback

Even though interviewees emphasized internal communication and coordination through different types of meetings, we observed giving feedback to each other was not formed in the culture or a part of their work. Overall, employees wished to receive more feedback regarding their

performance from their teammates and some from a manager. Several employees referred to a scarcity of structures and processes to give and receive productive feedback. One employee commented: “I realized that there isn't really a process or format for it.”. Another stated, “I don't really get feedback to be honest”. Additionally, one interviewee emphasized that Appli's flat structure has advanced transparency and open communication, but the feedback culture was not present. According to Rummeler and Brache (2012), the ideal situation is for organizations to embrace formal and informal feedback practices at every level. In Appli's case, we noted that the main feedback was based on the twice-a-year appraisal by their impact model, communicated from a manager. The fact that the feedback is communicated from a manager who is not working in the same team seems to be challenging, as stated by one manager, “I have a harder time giving great feedback because I don't observe their work.”.

Additionally, we noted a negative perception of the impact model. For example, it was stated, “I hate the impact model” and “I'm not super sure if it's done with the benefit of the employee in mind”. The current setup with the main feedback being communicated twice a year by a manager who is not working in the same team seems to increase the tension between autonomy and control. We argue that it creates tension since the current feedback for some employees is perceived as something controlling in a negative sense rather than something that supports their development and autonomy. One employee stated, “It's much better if we give feedback to each other within the team rather than just wait once a year and hear it.” The lack of not having processes for feedback within the daily operations and instead of having feedback sessions twice a year through the impact model, seems to create a tension between control and autonomy. In line with existing literature, we identified interest in improving the feedback-friendly culture but not in practice. People were stressing the importance of feedback but did not show interest in implementing any practices. Thus, we identified a passive approach toward feedback improvements. One can suggest that it would risk individuals' feeling of autonomy since it would create more coordination and monitoring in daily work. However, according to Dood and Ganster (1996), having a high level of autonomy is most effective in terms of performance and satisfaction when it is combined with feedback.

5.4 Norm Based Control and its Effect on Impact

When employees describe how their job performance is evaluated, they refer to having “no hard measurement”. Instead, they describe that the performance is evaluated another way, for instance by a twice-a-year appraisal “impact model”. We noted how the impact model aims to get employees to internalize with the company's values (Willmott, 1993) by a manager’s description as “telling everybody in the organization what the company values, what types of behavior and what types of activities.” Another manager stated that the purpose behind the impact model is for the employees to “trying to find the path” referring to behaving and performing in a valued way at Appli. Through the “impact model” we argue that the company attempts to influence the employees’ values to align with the company’s values by letting the employees reflect on their performance by asking how they have developed themselves, how they have contributed to the team, and how they have improved the organization. (Kunda, 1992; Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Costas, 2012). We argue that the organizational control at Appli seems to focus on normative control rather than behavioral and output control, which according to Robertson and Swan (2003), is more relevant when managing knowledge workers due to the challenge of measuring complex work tasks and its potential to balance autonomy and control. The challenges of measuring and evaluating the work at Appli are noted throughout the interviewees. For example, one employee stated that the use of an impact model is appropriate because the performance is not possible to measure in another way, “I don’t think it’s possible to measure it actually[...] That’s why we have this impact model.” Another employee referred to “it’s very easy as a developer to exaggerate what you have done” and “you can talk around it so much.”

As discussed earlier, the teams at Appli have the freedom to organize their work tasks and are mainly controlled by coordination within the team rather than being controlled by managers. The absence of “hard measurement” in the form of having behavioral and output control creates a feeling of a company that one employee describes to be “truly free in a way”. However, we argue that the “impact model” guides the team members’ actions which reduces the need for formal control and formalization (Mintzberg, 1979). As discussed before, one-on-one meetings are mainly perceived as control, but we note how the meetings also control the employees through normative manners. By reflecting on the impact model during the one-on-one meetings, the managers are pushing the values of the company to the front line. During these meetings, employees are therefore affected directly as well as indirectly. The manager’s role is to guide that employee in the right

direction. Considering earlier discussion regarding employees perceiving one-on-one meetings as support, we argue that it steers normative control from the manager's perspective. Managers aim to push forward the ideology of the company and make employees feel open and transparent. Whereas when employees are open and transparent, they tend to be receptive to the company's norms.

As mentioned earlier, we note that using normative control through the impact model might also harm the company. Some employees resisted the impact model by saying, "I hate the impact model" *and* "I'm not super sure if it's done with the benefit of the employee in mind". This skepticism and negative view of the impact model could lead to resistance, such as cynical distancing (Fleming & Spicer, 2003). Drawing parallels with Deci and Ryan's (1987) distinction that organizational control either can support autonomy or perceive as control, the normative control through the impact model seems to create a feeling of control rather than autonomy for some employees.

5.5 External Control Mechanism

As mentioned earlier, the teams generally perceive that they have the autonomy to organize their way of working, which was described as advantageous in order to "meet the customer's needs", and "autonomy works well because each partner will have very specific needs". Having autonomy within the team, therefore, gives the teams the possibility to align their way of working with the customer needs. This indicates that the autonomy that Appli gives, is in some way replaced by control from the client, in the sense that the teams are adjusting to the client's needs. Therefore, the team's client is working as a control mechanism and as a guiding tool to assess a team's performance (Flamholtz et al., 1985). Moreover, a team lead described her perspective that the team she is working with is not "performing well" but that they have an excuse "because the client is happy". Thus, it strengthens that the satisfaction of the client is an important factor when evaluating a team's performance.

In line with other research, we found that due to the complexity of technology tasks and the lack of expertise among the clients make it difficult for the client to evaluate the team's performance (Alvesson, 2001; Deets, 1997). However, in our study, we note the complexity of work tasks seems to create a challenge for the employees between wanting to have worked on something that is tangible for the client while working on things that the employees know are important but are not visible to the client. The need to update the client is demonstrated in quotes such as, "something

that they can see and click and feel” and “we want to show something for the client, but we still need to do our job”. Thus, this indicates that the clients create an informal control mechanism that influences the employees' work performance.

When it comes to relationships with clients, it is important to get along, specify expectations and agree on solutions with external partners (Alvesson, 1995). Hence, the tension of control is present whenever the team introduces the outcome for their clients. The results of our analysis revealed two sides of employee perceptions. The first emphasized the need to meet client needs, while the second celebrated creative freedom and ownership of the product. From the company’s perspective, a desire to succeed and obtain rewards is supported by individuals’ motivation to pursue goals and comply with standards.

6 Conclusion

6.1 Research Contributions

As new forms of organizational structures emerged and traditional organization study streams have engendered new insight into autonomous flat structures, we identified opportunities for research on the tension between autonomy and control in such a context. In awareness of this managerial dilemma, this study aimed to investigate factors impacting the perception of control and autonomy in an aspiring flat structured organization. Moreover, we intended to explore the team structure dynamics that affected the interplay of employees' perception of control and autonomy. Through a qualitative case study, we conducted interviews at the IT agency Appli to answer the following research question:

How does employees' perception of control and autonomy interplay in an aspiring flat structure organization?

The aspiring flat organizations with cross-functional teams hold a complex understanding of individuals' perceptions of having autonomy or being controlled at work. Our findings suggest that employees may experience less control from the management due to cross-functional teams and having a competence-based manager who works in another team. However, working in a team results in a high necessity for coordination, indirect peer-based control and client control. We found that employees perceived Appli as flat and autonomous due to the company's structure that provided the freedom to the teams to organize their work, low managerial control and open communication. However, we found that Appli's strategy is based on normative impulses that make employees believe they are autonomous and flat since management does not apply direct hard measurements or monitoring mechanisms to daily operations. Nevertheless, we can identify informal control that is based on teams' dynamics and the needs of the client. While Robertson and Swan (2003) argue that normative control is appropriate when dealing with the dilemma of autonomy and control, we suggest that control based on coordination of team members' work may also achieve a balance between autonomy and control. The subtle interplay between autonomy and control in a flat structure with cross-functional teams reduced tension as a result of the balance between autonomy and control.

One key aspect of our study was the emphasis on having a culture of transparency. By normalizing transparency, the company seems to have better control over the employees, while the employees perceive that they have a better understanding of what is happening in the company. The tension between autonomy and control was therefore also reduced due to the high level of transparency within the company. However, while we found that most of the employees describe Appli as an aspiring flat structure where people communicate with each other, we found a lack of feedback. The lack of feedback seems to result from having no processes and structure for giving and receiving feedback. Additionally, the main feedback the employees received was based on the performance appraisal “impact model” that communicated the main values of Appli as a company. Employees were nudged to create an impact on different levels, including personal, team-based and organizational. We suggest that the implementation of the model has strengthened the tension between autonomy and control rather than created balance.

Furthermore, we identified that each team demonstrated having dependencies on each other while experiencing the work as autonomous and independent. Therefore, we addressed another question of our study, which was:

How does the team structure influence the perception of control and autonomy?

The team dependencies we identified throughout the study, supported transparency and open communication as something that impacted the perception of control and autonomy. Since individuals are dependent on each other’s work when working in a team, control activities were more readily accepted because they did not interfere with the autonomy of individuals. We identified that most of the control activities in the daily work are based on coordination operations between the team members. This type of control is done through sprint planning, daily check-ins and work progress meetings. We found that those activities enhance teamwork through alignment and coordination and do not interfere with the feeling of autonomy. With support from Langfred and Rockman (2016), the controlling activities within the team could rather empower autonomy in the sense that it gives employees greater control over the team member’s work.

6.2 Practical Implications

The findings of our study can also have an important practical value to the business world. With a deeper understanding and insights into how autonomy and control interplay, managers and companies can implement the findings of this study. More specifically, the findings of the study can create a better understanding for KIFs that aspire to create a flat structure and autonomous way of working with cross-functional teams. For example, when the manager is not working in the same team, the managerial work is perceived as something supporting rather than controlling. In Appli's case, we identified that the managerial control through one-on-one meetings, from the employee's perception, was perceived as a way of supporting autonomy. Thus we note that controlling activities do not always need to create the tension between autonomy and control. Through the one-on-one meetings, we note how autonomy is embedded in managerial control.

Furthermore, our study creates a deeper understanding of the importance of having processes for feedback embedded in the daily operation. We found that there needs to be structure and processes for giving and receiving productive feedback. While transparency and communication seem to be valuable for coordinating work, it is not enough to create a feedback culture. When reflecting on findings from our case company Appli, we found a possible implication for other similar companies that overlook these structures in their daily operations.

6.3 Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

In conclusion, we will address the main limitations of the study and further suggestions for the research field. We have identified a growing interest in this topic, addressing the balance between control and autonomy and enabling investigation of holistic control in flat organizations, but also the relevance for managers and organizations. However, all studies are limited to a certain extent making it crucial to be self-reflexive. One of these concerns is the generalizability challenge due to small samples in a single case study company. One can argue that the findings could have been different if we had studied different companies. It is also possible that the findings would have been different if we conducted interviews with other employees since the experiences were highly subjective and varied from each other. Therefore, our empirical findings are hardly generalizable due to the representation of small samples and limitations in methodological choices.

We turn our attention to the fact that we were not able to observe the interactions of employees' in more detail through ethnographic research and longer time periods. For future studies, it would be interesting to study the interplay of team dynamics in order to get more insights into peer-based control, external influences and perception of autonomous work in practice. For this study, we were not able to conduct observations due to close interaction with the external clients, which would risk the ethical barriers and confidentiality. In addition, since the company prioritizes transparency and open communication through psychological safety and trust, our external exploration would risk employees' sense of trust and transparency. Therefore, we were limited to collecting our empirical data by conducting semi-structured interviews that may have been biased. Semi-structured interviews were used to keep more of an open mind about the outline of the study, which can be criticized for its inductive approach. Additionally, considering the fact that Appli was not technically a flat company made us speculate more artificially by placing Appli in the context of an aspiring flat organization. In relation to the limitations, for future studies, it would be interesting to study the interplay between autonomy and control through a comprehensive ethnographic study.

Last, we identify several interesting topics for future studies. For example, throughout the interviews, we identified that feedback was an important factor in one's daily work. Due to the increase in hybrid-work settings, it would be interesting to analyze how feedback in a hybrid-work setting is perceived and its impact on the tension between autonomy and control.

7 References

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Appendix A: Interview guide

Introduction Questions

- Please tell us a little bit about yourself. Who are you and what do you do at Appli?
- How long have you worked at the company?
- Where do you work? Remote? On-site? Flexible?
- Could you briefly introduce your team where you work?
- Can you tell us about a normal day in your workweek?
- How would you describe yourself in your team?
- How would you describe the structure of the company? How would you evaluate it?
- How would you describe the team culture?

Control

- How do you plan your work tasks?
- How do you coordinate your work with your team members?
- How do you set your goals?
- How do you report about your work?
- How do you keep track of your work progress?
- Does your work include any measurement tools to measure your performance?
- Would you describe yourself as having freedom to decide on what you are going to work on?
- How independent do you feel when you plan your work?
- How independent are you when you work?
- Do you feel that it is helping you to perform better? How do you think the measurement impacts your work performance?
 - *Do you have an example of why it is good/why it is not good for your work outcome?*
- How do you plan the sprints?
- How is your work/performance evaluated?
- How do you get feedback regarding your work performance?
 - How does the feedback make you feel?
 - Do you think you get enough feedback from your work?
- Can you take us through a one-on-one meeting?
- Do you think the impact model is helping with achieving your goals?
- What is the purpose of impact model?
- How does the work with clients affect the autonomy of your work?

Well-being

- How do you think the measurement impacts your work well-being?
 - *Do you have an example of why it is good/why it is not good for your well-being?*
- Have you ever had a situation where you felt that you needed more support in your work?

- How do you communicate about how you feel at work?
- How would you describe your relationship with your manager?

Additional questions to managers

- How have you aligned your work according to the values of Appli as a company?
- How have Appli's values impacted your way of managing people?
- How would you evaluate the communication at the company?
- How do you give and receive feedback?
- How do you give the employees freedom over their own work?
- How do you think they perceive autonomy?
- We have heard a lot about one-on-one meetings. From your perspective; what is the purpose of the on-one-on meetings?
- Could you describe the procedure you do when evaluating employees' performance?
- What is the purpose of the impact model that you use for yearly evaluation?
- How do you involve your employees to talk about their work performance?

Appendix B: Interviews

Name of employee (pseudonyms)	Role within the company	Length of the interview	Date for interview
Sam	Team lead	60 mins	2022-03-28
Alice	HR	55 mins	2022-03-30
Maria	Quality Assurance	55 mins	2022-04-08
Emma	Designer	50 mins	2022-04-12
Marcus	Developer	55 mins	2022-04-12
Macy	Designer	60 mins	2022-04-12
Ted	Developer	60 mins	2022-04-19
Robin	Manager	55 mins	2022-04-19
Kim	Manager Product lead	50 mins	2022-04-20
Andrea	Team lead	55 mins	2022-04-28
Sara	Manager	45 mins	2022-05-06