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Growing Apart

*How Employees In a Scaleup With a Hybrid Workplace
Are Affected By Leadership*

By

Emily Benning & Philip Ednie

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Supervisor: Stephan Schaefer

Examiner: Stefan Sveningsson

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Abstract

- Title:** Growing Apart: How Are Employees In a Scaleup With a Hybrid Workplace Affected by Leadership
- Authors:** Emily Benning and Philip Ednie
- Supervisor:** Stephan Schaefer
- Course:** BUSN49, Degree Project in Master's Programme Managing People, Knowledge and Change, Business Administration, 15 ECTS
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- Purpose:** The purpose is to understand the perspective of employees affected by leaders in a scaleup with a hybrid workplace. The study aims to fill the knowledge gap in understanding how scaleup organizations adopting a hybrid work model navigate the intersection of hybrid work and rapid organizational growth, considering their unique position in today's economy.
- Methodology:** This research employs a qualitative study with an abductive approach while following an interpretivist tradition with a single case study. Our empirical material consists of 13 semi-structured interviews and document studies.
- Theoretical Perspective:** This research is based on previous studies discussing several literature topics, including leadership, employee sensemaking, engagement, communication and flexibility. This study focussed on these topics in the context of a scaleup with a hybrid workplace, which has limited academic exploration.
- Contribution:** This study's contribution to understanding how employees in scaleups with hybrid workplaces are affected by leaders is twofold. Firstly, we uncovered the flexibility dilemma faced by these organizations. Secondly, we introduce the metaphor of parents raising a teenager to illustrate the changing dynamics between leaders and employees.
- Keywords:** employee sensemaking, employee engagement, leadership, hybrid workplace, scaleups, communication

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Enjoy the read—we hope you will find it enjoyable and insightful.

Emily Benning & Philip Ednie
Lund, May 19, 2023

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Ah, spring, the season of rebirth, renewal and awakening. It is the time of year when winter unshackles us from its cold grip as we impatiently wait for summer to bestow warm sunny days. However, in 2020, springtime took a whole new meaning—the COVID-19 pandemic¹. Overnight, many of us had no choice but to lock ourselves in our homes and proceed with work away from the office (Galanti, Guidetti, Mazzei, Zappalà, Toscano, 2021). This shift was the largest workforce mobilization since World War II (Ozimek, 2020). Organizations quickly restructured to allow employees to proceed with day-to-day tasks using technologies such as video conferencing and instant messaging software rather than face-to-face interactions (Saura, Ribeiro-Soriano & Saldaña, 2022).

The reality imposed by the pandemic impacted the interdependence between office and home environments, the execution of work and, in turn, the role of traditional physical workplaces (Yang, Kim & Hong, 2021). Amidst the pandemic, remote work allowed employees to explore the suitability of various work settings for different tasks, realizing that certain activities were better supported in remote-based environments and others in-office (Yang, Kim & Hong, 2021). They add that the recognition of the benefits of remote work led organizations to adopt a hybrid workplace model. With that being said, what is a hybrid workplace exactly? It is "a flexible work model that supports a blend of in-office, remote, and on-the-go workers. It offers employees the autonomy to choose to work wherever and however they are most productive" (Vidhyaa & Ravichandran, 2022, p.292).

According to Oppong Peprah (2023), while hybrid workplaces were previously unfamiliar to most organizations and an unexplored topic for academics, the pandemic and rapid technological advancements have created a favourable environment for their increased adoption. Hybrid work provides organizations with unique advantages derived from the combination of remote and traditional work methods (Iqbal, Khalid & Barykin, 2021) and is now expected by numerous employees (Oppong Peprah, 2023). Consequently, hybrid workplaces are poised to become a dominant work mode in years to come (Oppong Peprah,

¹ The COVID-19 pandemic is a global outbreak of coronavirus, an infectious disease caused by the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) virus (Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, p.1)

2023). This means that leaders need to reimagine their role in the hybrid office and identify the newly developed needs of employees (Odom, Franczak & McAllister, 2022). Doing so is very important because, as Alvesson, Blom and Sveningsson (2017) state, an organization's success is ascribed to their leadership, making it vital to adapt to the new reality appropriately. Leaders must wrap their heads around the fact that there is no going back—things are changing whether they like it or not (Odom, Franczak, McAllister, 2022). Rather than sticking to the past, they need to create, in collaboration with workers, what will be (Odom, Franczak, McAllister, 2022). Leaders must recognize that a hybrid workplace impacts their role, and it is their responsibility to integrate and accommodate employees no matter their work setting (Odom, Franczak, McAllister, 2022).

Hence, as leaders need to reconceptualize the workplace in collaboration with employees, we wanted to get deeper insights into employees' perspectives of hybrid workplaces and how they are affected by leadership decisions. With that being said, how does one evaluate this? As far as understanding how employees perceive leaders' actions, sensemaking offers a good analytical lens. While there is no singular definition, the dominating agreement refers to sensemaking as the process by which individuals attempt to create a plausible understanding of ambiguous, equivocal or confusing problems or situations (Colville, Ian & Brown, 2012; Weick, 1995). Therefore, as hybrid workplaces are a new concept bringing a lot of uncertainty, organizational decision-making and change is driven by continuous sensemaking by workers (Palmer, Dufour & Akin, 2017). As leaders communicate and implement initiatives within an organization, employees may not interpret them as intended (Ancona, 2012). Leaders must ensure alignment through collective sensemaking and communication, as deviating views between organizational members can create confusion, dissatisfaction and conflicts (Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017).

Furthermore, evaluating employee engagement will provide deeper insights into how they are ultimately affected by leaders' decisions related to adapting to the new reality of hybrid workplaces. Engaged employees are individuals involved and enthusiastic about their role and tasks who act in a way that benefits the organization's interests (Pointon, 2017). As mentioned by Popli & Rizvi (2016), "leadership has a critical input in fostering employee engagement" (p.968). They add that research suggests leadership is among the most influential factors in workplace engagement. Additionally, engaged employees are crucial for

positive organizational performance, just as an organization's success is ascribed to their leadership (Pointon, 2017; Robinson, Perryman & Hayday, 2004).

1.2 Problem Statement

While this shift towards hybrid workplaces is widespread and affecting many companies (Oppong Peprah, 2023), we were interested in discovering how they affect a specific type of organization—scaleups.

What is a scaleup? A scaleup is an organization going past its startup phase as they experience accelerated growth—above 20% over three years (OECD, 2021). In addition to growth, according to Santander (2022), scaleups have a more mature, established and profitable product or service, have a scalable and profitable business model, receive financing from third-party investors and are composed of individuals with specific specializations (rather than general).

Why scaleups? Due to their tremendous growth, high performance and significant organizational change (Strengers, Mutsaers, Van Rossum & Graamans, 2022), scaleups present considerable leadership challenges as leaders must quickly adapt their approach to the new reality and context of the organization (Hull, 2016). He adds that leaders must recognize that the methods used in the startup days to lead may no longer work. According to Strengers et al. (2022), scaleup organizations “play a significant role in job creation, innovation and economic growth” (p.116). However, little is known about the factors that enable or prevent their growth, despite their recognized value (OECD, 2021). Due to the relatively recent emergence of the term scaleup and the scarcity of studies conducted on this topic, there is significant interest in researching and comprehending the factors contributing to the performance and growth of these organizations (Strengers et al., 2022).

Furthermore, the novelty and increased popularity of hybrid workplaces demonstrate the importance of understanding the implications and challenges it presents for leadership. Indeed, many leaders are now faced with a context that they have not been accustomed to in the past—dealing with employees with different schedules, work settings and geographical locations. Leaders must steer their workforce through this new reality without any guidelines and unknown best practices (Souza, 2022). Therefore, we believe it is crucial to investigate

scaleups adopting a hybrid work model as they play a significant role in today's economy and are also in a unique position. Indeed, scaleups find themselves at the intersection of two significant forces affecting leadership, the shift towards hybrid workplaces and rapid organization growth. Lastly, there appears to be a knowledge gap in both areas, making it even more important to study their situation.

With that being said, as we are attempting to understand leadership through employee's perspective, we propose the following research question:

How are employees affected by founders' and senior leaders' approach to leading a scaleup with a hybrid workplace?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Leadership

As we are exploring leaders' impact on employees, let us begin by exploring theoretical concepts related to it and set the foundation for our study. We will align ourselves with Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson's (2017) definition of leadership, which states that it is an "asymmetrical (unequal) relationship (formally or informally, permanently or temporarily, but not only momentarily) involving followers. Leaders are interpersonally trying to define meaning/reality for others who are inclined to (on a largely voluntary basis) accept such meaning-making and reality-defining influencing acts" (p.8). Furthermore, our study's scope will differ from most traditional leadership literature. Historically, leadership is connected to people who supervise subordinates in one form or another (Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017). However, we will shift our focus from supervisors and middle management to founders, executives and senior leaders—implicating more abstract organizational challenges such as culture, identity, vision and strategy (Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017). While we will dive into leadership as it relates more specifically to hybrid workplaces and scales-up later on, we will begin by exploring how it intertwines with culture and communication in a broader sense.

2.1.1 Leadership and Culture

For our study, we will also use Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson's (2017) definition of culture, which states that "culture may be seen as a system of shared meanings, understandings and values" (p.64). Every aspect of organizational life has a cultural component (Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017). They add that ideas, meanings, and beliefs of a culturally and socially shared nature shape how people think, feel, value, and act. Corporate culture is seen as crucial, as it takes care of steering and control, which prevents a gap between the organizations' goals and their individuals' objectives (Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017). Additionally, it is believed that culture is essential for organizational performance, supported by Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson (2017) who claim that an organization's success is ascribed to their culture.

So, how exactly does culture tie in with leadership? Many people consider creating and modifying culture as the centrepiece of exercising leadership (Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017). While this statement may not be entirely accurate or accepted, the fact remains that leadership and culture are closely intertwined (Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017). They state that economic, legal and structural forces are not the only ones influencing organizational leaders—culture also plays an important role. Culture considerably guides and restricts the behaviours of leaders and members of organizations as a whole (Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017).

As culture dictates how individuals think, feel and act, circumstances arise where it overshadows leadership as people follow the collective rather than their superior's attempt to lead (Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017). Nevertheless, this does render obsolete the importance of leadership—it remains vital to reinforce and create culture (Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017). However, they mention that leaders' decisions and actions must align with the norms and values of those affected by them. The collective power of employees means that leaders must negotiate rather than impose decisions (Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017). This is why actions taken by leaders are often met with resistance—which, once again, makes employee sensemaking vital (Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017). The best way to overcome this resistance and model desired behaviours is to leverage trusted individuals with a high degree of influence central to the organization (Arena, Hines, & Golden III, 2023).

2.1.2 Leadership Communication

Communication is vital to engagement and effective leadership (Clutterbuck & Hirst, 2002). One cannot comprehend the leadership process without first understanding how the leader communicates, which makes it even more crucial for a leader to know how to interact with employees (Pointon, 2017). "Leadership communication is defined as inspiring and encouraging an individual or a group by systemic and meaningful sharing of information by using excellent communication skills" (Luthra, 2015, p.3). According to her, leadership communication is a complicated process, including developing a strategy in which writing and speaking are necessary to control challenging situations. According to Luthra (2015), effective and accurate communication is essential for growing as a successful leader. She adds that for effective leadership, a leader must know how to interact and share expectations with diverse groups in the organization. Each group may call for a distinct type of communication and leadership, and how a leader communicates sets the tone for the rest of the team (Kouzes & Posner, 1993 as cited in Luthra, 2015).

Furthermore, trust, truth and ethics are other factors that individuals find important when following a leader (Kouzes & Posner, 1993 as cited in Luthra, 2015). Trust is a powerful weapon that can increase reliability and integrity, which benefits leaders in uncertain situations (Luthra, 2015). She states that a leader must be able to communicate his vision with individuals to build this trust element, which fosters an environment where leaders can achieve their objectives by inspiring and leading employees and teams effectively. However, trust plays again a role in this, without trust it can be very challenging for a leader to stimulate, involve and hold their employees (Luthra, 2015). It is also vital for leaders and their teams to develop effective communication skills because doing so will help them finish projects and enable their organization to succeed and expand (Luthra, 2015).

Additionally, strong leaders are recognized for their ability to communicate by adhering to a specific set of core principles and actively promoting and instilling those values in others, ensuring alignment with their teams (Luthra, 2015). Moreover, the best communicators possess the unique quality of listening, which makes them good observers and enables them to read a person's or group's mind "by analyzing the attitudes, behavior, activities, ideals, and anxieties" (Luthra, 2015, p. 2). Furthermore, Pointon (2017) states that the connection

between engagement and effective leadership includes communication and active listening in order to support subordinates to draw upon their existing abilities.

Now that we have covered the fundamental aspects of leadership as it relates to culture and communication, it is time to delve into topics closely related to our research topic. The following section will discuss hybrid workplaces and how topics such as leadership, culture, communication, and relationships come into play in such environments.

2.2 Hybrid Workplaces

As mentioned in our introduction, hybrid workplaces are quickly growing in popularity. These workplace models can be categorized into four types: flexible hybrid, fixed hybrid, office-first hybrid and remote-first work model (Vidhyaa & Ravichandran, 2022). This study will focus on the first type—the flexible hybrid work model which allows “employees to choose their location and working hours based on their priorities for the day. For example, if they need to spend time focusing on a project, they can choose to work from home or in a coffee shop. If they want a sense of community, need to meet with their team, attend a training session or join a town hall, they can choose to go into the office” (Vidhyaa & Ravichandran, 2022, p.292). Additionally, researchers mention that the benefits of the flexible hybrid work model include freedom and flexibility in the work environment, creating trust between employees and employers, increasing loyalty, expanding the potential pool of employees, and improving the bottom line (Vidhyaa & Ravichandran, 2022).

Hybrid workplaces are a complex web of employees migrating between various locations or sticking to a single one (Vidhyaa & Ravichandran, 2022). Vidhyaa and Ravichandran (2022) also state that these work environments put power in the hands of employees by providing the flexibility to choose where they prefer working. However, it is not without its set of challenges. Indeed, this model makes it difficult to identify when to go to the office and participate in in-person teamwork. It also causes a lack of visibility into how many people are going to the office on a given day, leading to capacity issues (Vidhyaa & Ravichandran, 2022).

Before we dive into specific material relating to hybrid workplaces, we want to point out that a considerable part of our references and selected literature relate to remote workplaces. The

reasons for this are twofold. Firstly, hybrid workplaces are a novel concept that has received very little academic attention (Oppong Peprah, 2023). Secondly, hybrid workplaces include a remote work component and similar complexities due to the physical distance between leaders and employees—making the literature relevant to our research.

2.2.1 Culture in a Hybrid Workplace

The challenges mentioned in this section's introductions are not the only ones brought by hybrid workplaces. Indeed, according to Oppong Peprah (2023) "themes that derived as the negative sides of hybrid workplace were: distractions; less bonding; slow decision-making process; weakened collective identity; weakened corporate culture; work-life merge; dearth inter-worker interaction; loneliness; and inadequate supervision" (p.8). Furthermore, "researchers found that remote working does not support organizational norms which pertains to organizational culture, rules of behavior, trust and interaction among workers and social cohesiveness, as well as loneliness and lack of tools to combat isolation" (Alexander, Cracknell, De Smet, Langstaff, Mysore & Ravid, 2021; Knight, Olaru, Lee & Parker, 2022; Gilson, Coenen, Hallman, Holterman, Mathiassen & Straker, 2022, as cited in Oppong Peprah, 2023, p.3) This is also argued by Iqbal, Khalid and Barykin (2021), who state that due to the lack of face-to-face interaction, adoption of internalizing a mission, vision, goals and objectives, as well as organizational values are more challenging. Oppong Peprah (2023) adds "that working from home increases the change of the development of two different distinct cultures, which increases the feeling of 'experiencing rapid feelings of loneliness, disenfranchisement and unhappiness" (p.8).

In a hybrid environment where employees are separated from each other, cultural transformation is a huge challenge, as the chosen work setting of employees impacts the transmission of cultural behaviours (Arena, Hines, & Golden III, 2023). They add that the closer people are to one another, or as they call it, "network density," the more contagious cultural behaviours are from one individual to another. In a hybrid setting, the network density is lower, which affects how culture practices cluster and spread within the company (Arena, Hines, & Golden III, 2023). They state that when a trustworthy member of the organization demonstrates a new behaviour, a group with high interconnectivity is more likely to propagate and use it swiftly. According to Arena, Hines and Golden III (2023), individuals are more inclined to support and normalize behavioural patterns after receiving their endorsement from a trusted employee of an organization. Therefore employee

interactions are essential for spreading and demonstrating the standards and conduct required to foster the desired culture (Arena, Hines, & Golden III, 2023).

2.2.2 Leadership in a Hybrid Workplace

Following Bartsch, Weber, Büttgen and Huber (2020) and Huang et al. (2010), we will define virtual or remote leadership as leadership in a geographically dispersed work environment where employee interaction is based on digital tools. In these work environments, leaders need to assume greater responsibility (Neufeld, Wan & Fang, 2010). Indeed, having people at a distance can present certain challenges as, according to Bass (1997), effective leadership "depends on physical proximity, social and organizational propinquity, and networks of open channels of communications" (p.658). Establishing a quality relationship built on trust between superiors and subordinates in the context of physical distance is vital (Caulat, 2006; Lauring & Jonasson, 2018).

Distance tremendously affects interpersonal relationships, which are the core of practicing leadership (Yukl, O'Donnell, & Taber, 2009). Varma, Jaiswal, Pereira and Kumar (2022) argue that, in a hybrid workplace, the work location itself is a moderating component in how frequently employees interact with leaders and the quality of the relationship they establish with them. Schreier, Udomkit and Matt (2022) have found that when an employee is hired remotely and does not have face-to-face time with leaders, working from home can hinder the development of a strong relationship due to a limitation in immediate feedback and effective signals. However, they also state that this is not the case for employees who used to work in the office and established in-person connections with their leaders before moving to a remote workplace.

To establish these strong relationships with remote employees, leaders must rely on frequent communications (Varma et al., 2022). Neufeld, Wan and Fang (2008) mention that "as organizations and employees become increasingly dispersed, communication becomes the principal means by which individuals exercise leadership" (p.228). In these environments, leaders and employees communicate and collaborate synchronously and asynchronously through various channels such as emails, videoconferencing and instant messaging software (Neufeld, Wan & Fang, 2008). However, they also state that technology in an international remote setting can create communication challenges related to time differences and language. Furthermore, Kuznetsov and Kuznetsova (2014) argue that translating terms can create a

mismatch in vocabulary richness and be a source of confusion to the extent that it distorts reality. Therefore, it can be understood that leaders need to give extra effort to convert and explain what would typically be easily communicated in a face-to-face situation (Neufeld, Wan & Fang, 2008). However, as Kelley and Kelloway (2012) explain, in the context where a remote worker has a personal relationship with a leader, a shared common understanding between them will require less communication clarification—relating to our earlier topic of establishing a prior relationship face-to-face. Now that we have established how important communication is for leadership in hybrid workplaces, we will dig deeper into this topic.

2.2.3 Communication in a Hybrid Workplace

The rise of computer-mediated communication technology has completely changed how employees engage with one another and how they execute tasks connected to their job, including the reliance on virtual teams to complete work-related tasks (Johnson, Bettenhausen & Gibbons, 2009). When people are scattered, communication becomes the primary source through which employees execute their work (Penley & Hawkins, 1985). Success in communication is frequently highlighted as a significant predictor of virtual team effectiveness. Research examining communication at a distance has shown changes in frequency, quality, and satisfaction with communication (Neufeld, Wan & Fang, 2008).

One of the main ways to evaluate communication channels is through media richness (Palmer, Dufour & Akin, 2017). They add that media richness concerns the quantity and type of information that can be transmitted via a specific media. Palmer, Dufour and Akin (2017) state that there are three characteristics affecting the richness of a communication channel, "(1) the ability to handle many items of information at the same time, (2) the availability of rapid feedback, and (3) the ability to establish a personal focus" (p.232). Through these characteristics, communication channels can be placed on a richness hierarchy with face-to-face interactions at the top as it meets all three criteria (Palmer, Dufour & Akin, 2017). Videoconferencing also allows for immediate feedback and information cues such as body language and tone of voice—which is not the case for media with lower richness, such as instant messaging (Setlock, Quinones & Fussell, 2007). Studies of virtual teams have demonstrated that the channels used change communication patterns, leading to misinterpretation and misunderstanding and ultimately can lead to a communication breakdown (Klitmøller & Lauring, 2013).

Additionally, individuals in teams built upon computer-mediated communication are less satisfied than face-to-face teams (Baltes, Dickson, Sherman, Bauer & LaGanke, 2002). The reasons for this dissatisfaction are the lack of social cues in communications and a slower decision-making process (Baltes et al., 2002). Moreover, relying on virtual communication increases the possibility of misreading messages, which can cause dissatisfaction and conflict (Workman, Kahnweiler, Bommer, 2003). Kelley and Kelloway (2012) mention that online messages are often perceived as colder and more negative than face-to-face communications.

With that being said, remote communications do not only come with downsides. These channels also allow teams to perform better than in face-to-face situations on tasks demanding divergent thinking (DeSanctis & Monge 1999). Additionally, brainstorming is more beneficial in this context because of the decrease in team pressure (Bordia, 1997). There is also little evidence that computer-mediated communication will lead to extremely detrimental outcomes such as deviant behaviours or sabotage (Workman, Kahnweiler, Bommer, 2003).

2.2.4 Relationships in a Hybrid Workplace

As mentioned above, teams that rely on virtual communication are more likely to miss out on socially significant team interactions (Tangirala & Alge, 2004) and, as Derndorfer, Disslbacher, Lechinger, Mär and Six (2021) state, this is a negative aspect of hybrid work settings. This lack of interaction can result in new difficulties for organizational performance and innovative capability (Derndorfer et al., 2021). Additionally, Iqbal, Khalid and Barykin (2021) mention that adopting and internalizing a vision, mission, objectives and goals, as well as organizational values, is more difficult when there is a lack of face-to-face interaction.

Interactions and informal touchpoints among employees and leaders are crucial to establish and maintain relationships (Napier & Ferries, 1993, as cited in Brunelle, 2013). This aligns with Grant, Wallace and Spurgeon (2013), who state that building relationships with colleagues can be difficult for remote workers, as they lose out on face-to-face and office chit-chat. This is also supported by Yukl, O'Donnell, and Taber (2009), who state that distance affects interpersonal relationships and that technologies used for remote workers in interpersonal relationships will create emotional detachment in individuals, which is one of the foundations of a quality relationship (Napier & Ferries, 1993 as cited in Brunelle, 2013). Research also indicates that employees prefer to be in the office to maintain social contact

(Iqbal, Khalid & Barykin, 2021). They believe that an individual's relationships with coworkers can suffer due to the absence of physical engagement. They also state that there is a risk of becoming used to being alone to the point that interacting with others may become difficult. Communication and team bonding may suffer when this fatigue of people begins to set in (Iqbal, Khalid & Barykin, 2021).

2.3 Leadership, Relationships, Culture and Growth in Scaleups

Now that we have covered our research topic's hybrid work sphere, let us dive deeper into the world of scaleups. In young organizations, also known as startups, being so close to founders - working alongside them, participating in the same meetings and creating personal bonds - has the power to motivate and inspire employees (Hull, 2016). However, keeping engagement levels high as the organization scales represents a significant challenge. This is especially because the relationship between founders and workers is less tangible or even inexistent (Hull, 2016). He adds that having reduced links with leaders creates engagement issues, leading to increased turnover as the startup evolves into a scaleup. Hence, as mentioned in our introduction, the leadership approach must change and adapt to the new reality and context of the organization in tandem with growth (Hull, 2016). He adds that techniques and strategies that have been successful as a startup may not be effective anymore. As the company scales, the leaders should focus more on leadership topics essential for growth rather than operational tasks (Komulainen, 2018). He also states that the role and tasks of leaders will be to determine objectives and set a vision, properly share it with the organization and delegate accordingly.

The organization's growth also comes with a cultural shift—as a scaleup expands, subcultures develop, challenging the prevailing organizational culture (Strengers et al., 2022). They add that assessing different culture types and subcultures is crucial to understand the perspectives and values embraced throughout the organization. Multiple factors contribute to the emergence of subcultures (Strengers et al., 2022). Firstly, as the number of employees exceeds approximately 40-50 individuals, maintaining a unified culture becomes challenging—departments expand, groups form, and, consequently, subcultures develop (Strengers et al., 2022). Secondly, they add that the presence of diverse international staff in scaleups, with varied ethnic and cultural backgrounds, contributes to the formation of subcultures as well.

According to self-determination theory, which is defined by Deci & Ryan (2012) as "an empirically derived theory of human motivation and personality in social contexts," (p.1) internal drivers such as autonomy, competence and relatedness are all critical components to have engaged and committed employees (Hull, 2016). He continues by saying that, to succeed in their growth, leaders need to focus on these motivational drivers and shift their mindset from startup to scaleup. Hull (2016) argues that there are four drivers leaders need to focus on when their organization goes from a startup to scaleup: listen more, align employees and business goals, create feedback loops and build peer-to-peer networks. Listening involves going from directing to a coaching leadership approach where leaders take the time to listen and ask thoughtful and open-ended questions rather than telling subordinates what to do (Hull, 2016). Alignment, on the other hand, is when leaders shift their purely directive goal-setting to a process that is based on reciprocity and connects the organization's growth with the development of individuals. This ensures that individuals are tied directly to the company goals and are willing to go the extra mile (Hull, 2016). Creating a feedback loop involves creating two-way feedback with employees embedded in the organization's culture (Hull, 2016). Lastly, Hull (2016) describes building peer-to-peer networks as putting in place cross-functional programs to deepen the sense of belonging and inclusion that often gets lost during the organization's expansion. These programs bring together coworkers from different functional areas to share knowledge, break barriers created by departmental silos and brainstorm potential improvements for the organization, products and services (Hull, 2016).

2.4 Employee Sensemaking

Now that we have explored the foundations of leadership and the world of hybrid workplaces and scaleups, let us align ourselves with our angle of understanding leaders' actions through the perception of employees, starting with sensemaking. According to Taylor and Van Every (2000), sensemaking can be understood through the metaphor of attempting to navigate a dark room with only a flashlight. When someone orients themselves in a dark room, they can only see what is illuminated—never the entire room (Schaefer, in press). Nevertheless, they will be able to create a mental image of the room as a whole by piecing together what was observed (Schaefer, in press). He adds that, based on what they have compiled, individuals may share with others to help them navigate the environment themselves (Schaefer, in press).

However, if things were to move around in the room, they would have to adjust and adapt their understanding (Schaefer, in press).

Popularized by Karl Weick (Schaefer, in press), sensemaking is a tremendously influential concept in organizational studies (Colville, Ian & Brown, 2012). As previously mentioned, sensemaking refers to the process of attempting to create a plausible understanding of ambiguous, equivocal or confusing problems or context (Colville, Ian & Brown, 2012; Weick, 1995). Sensemaking is strongly linked to the interpretivist and social constructionist perspectives as it helps comprehend how individuals understand their realities (Colville, Ian & Brown, 2012). Sensemaking is concerned with understanding the practical activities of individuals engaged in real and concrete social situations (Boden, 1994). Weick, Sutcliffe and Obstfeld (2005) state that “sensemaking and organization constitute one another” (p. 410). To understand the relationship between sensemaking and organizing, discussing organizing ‘as’ sensemaking would be more accurate than organizing ‘through’ or ‘for’ sensemaking (Weick, 2001). Hence, organizations emerge from both organizing and sensemaking (Brown et al., 2015).

Organizational decision-making and change are driven by continuous sensemaking by frontline workers (Palmer, Dufour & Akin, 2017). As leaders communicate and implement initiatives within an organization, employees may not interpret them as intended (Ancona, 2012). Therefore, it comes as no surprise that Weick, Sutcliffe and Obstfeld (2005) argue that “Sensemaking is, importantly, an issue of language, talk, and communication. Situations, organizations, and environments are talked into existence” (p.409). Ancona (2012) provides an example where “leaders launched a new initiative to encourage lower-level employees to offer suggestions and ideas for new ways of working. They toured the plants, held meetings, and approached employees in informal settings. However, these actions were read differently by the employees. One employee, for example, explained that when a meeting is held in a conference room with arranged seating, the formal atmosphere prevents people from speaking up. Others explained that an apparently informal conversation with a leader is viewed as a “test,” not a true inquiry” (p.11).

2.5 Employee Engagement

Now that we have covered sensemaking, we will investigate employee engagement, starting by defining it according to Khan (1990), who states that it is "the harnessing of organization members' selves to their work roles; in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances" (p.694). 'Physically' concerns employees' physical energy and commitment when accomplishing their tasks (Kular, Gatenby, Rees, Soane & Truss, 2008). 'Cognitively,' on the other hand, refers to employees' beliefs about the organization, leaders and working conditions (Kular et al., 2008). Lastly, 'emotionally' is all about how employees feel about the three elements described here as well as their attitudes towards the company and its leaders (Kular et al., 2008). Therefore, engagement means being psychologically and physically present when occupying one's role and functions (Khan, 1990). According to Towers Perrin (2003), as cited in Pointon (2017), creating an engaged workforce is a never-ending process with strong links to employee performance and business outcomes (Kular et al., 2008). However, it is important to note that engagement is not simply about employee happiness or monetary compensation (Kular et al., 2008). While this is not to say that interesting salaries and benefits are not vital in attracting and retaining employees, their importance is not substantial in engaging people (Kular et al., 2008).

Research has pointed toward the fact that culture is directly linked to employee engagement (Williams, Dobson & Walters, 1989). An organization's culture and climate are believed to influence the levels of engagement (Kular et al., 2008). Engagement is more likely to occur in a friendly and supportive work environment and is fostered by factors such as aligning employees with the organization's vision (Alshehri, McLaughlin, Al-Ashaab & Hamad, 2017). Kular et al. (2008) mention that the irreplaceable pillars found to be fundamental for engagement included strong leadership, accountability, autonomy, flexibility in one's work environment and career development opportunities. Two-way communication, high levels of internal cooperation, a focus on employee development, a commitment to employee wellbeing and clear, accessible human resources policies have also been found to be key drivers of engagement (Kular et al., 2008). However, they also mention that while there is established knowledge of what drives engagement, it is also understood that there is no clear universal approach. Research has also demonstrated the need for employees to be involved in decision-making, especially when decisions affect their work (Kular et al., 2008). They add

that leaders of high-engagement workplaces do not create a culture of fear and blame where employees are reluctant to voice their ideas or take charge of initiatives. Rather, they create a trusting and challenging environment where people are encouraged to express their ideas, which will help the company improve and progress (Kular et al., 2008).

As mentioned above, employee engagement is crucial for an organization's performance. Even though there is a lot of research on engagement in a traditional work context, there is limited research on how engagement is perceived in hybrid workplaces (Naqshbandi, Kabir, Ishak & Islam, 2023). The extant research shows paradoxical findings of remote work on the influence of employee engagement. On the one hand, studies show that providing employees with flexibility increases autonomy and therefore contributes positively to their job performance as they foster growth, learning and development, which in turn leads to higher employee engagement (Bakker & Demerouti, 2014; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004, as cited in Naqshbandi et al., 2023). On the other hand, even though remote work may give employees more autonomy, this will lead to less support and little feedback from colleagues and managers, which leads to lower work engagement (Pulido-Martes, Cortés-Denia, & Lopez-Zafra, 2021, as cited in Naqshbandi et al., 2023). Moreover, they state that remote working "elevates workload, interruptions, misunderstandings and conflicts" (p.7). Lastly, those who rely on virtual communication are more likely to feel alone and have lower levels of affective commitment because they will miss out on socially significant team interactions (Tangirala & Alge, 2004; Workman, Kahnweiler, Bommer, 2003). Teams that rely on computer-mediated communication frequently experience difficulties creating a common identity that fosters affective commitment and often leads them to believe that other team members lack this commitment (Johnson, Bettenhausen & Gibbons, 2009).

3. Methodology

The following chapter will discuss the design of our study and the methodological choice that supports our thesis, along with the philosophical underpinnings. This will be followed by our research approach and all the pertinent information regarding the data collection. Furthermore, we will describe the organization and our chosen sample to conceptualize our data better. Lastly, to articulate our findings, we will explain how we extracted the data using open, axial and selected coding in the data analysis.

3.1 Philosophical Grounding & Research Approach

Our research aims to study and understand how employees are affected by founders' and senior leaders' approach to leading a scaleup with a hybrid workplace. We studied and analyzed this through employees' perceptions and the meanings and sense they give to leadership, in which we created a deeper understanding of their social environment. The employee responses we obtained are highly subjective, personal, and influenced by various (work) contexts and meanings. Therefore, our research is grounded in the interpretivist tradition, which holds that reality is subjective and characterized by context and individuals' points of view (Prasad, 2018). Interpretivism derives from an academic perspective that views human interpretation as the first step in learning about the social world (Prasad, 2018). Prasad (2018) also states that the purpose of the interpretivist tradition is to create new, richer understandings and interpretations of social worlds and contexts (Prasad, 2018). Our research is attempting to do so by examining how employees are affected and make sense of founders and senior leaders' approach to leading a scaleup with a hybrid workplace.

In addition, we based this study more specifically on social symbolic interactionism—a sub-type of the interpretivist tradition (Prasad, 2018). Social symbolic interactionism suggests that all social phenomena are symbolic and hold different meanings for different individuals. This means that organizational aspects of our studied scaleup, such as the leadership team, culture, flexible work policy, employee benefits, internal communications, relationships, and organizational structure, are all meaningful in the sense that they ignite a range of emotions and reactions and have different meanings for various people (Pfeffer, 1981, as cited in Prasad, 2018). However, these organizational phenomena only come to life in and through leaders and employees who make sense of these interpretations, in which one of the leaders' identities can strongly influence an employee's interpretation, which can change depending on the situation and context (Pfeffer, 1981, as cited in Prasad, 2018). As mentioned before, as researchers, we seek to understand social situations from the employees' perspective. We are interested in how individuals give meaning to organizational aspects, which aligns with symbolic interactionism (Prasad, 2018). Additionally, according to Rennstam & Waterford (2018), a qualitative methodology helps understand social interactions and the meaning of social phenomena in the contexts in which they occur. For the aforementioned reason, this study used a qualitative method to understand how leaders' actions affect employees and how they make sense of it in the context of a scaleup with a hybrid workplace.

Furthermore, our research approach is built upon an abductive approach, aligning with the qualitative methodology (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009; Moser & Williams, 2019). "Abduction is about discovering new concepts, new ideas and explanations by discovering surprising phenomena, data or events that cannot be explained by pre-existing knowledge" (Thornberg, 2012; as cited in Flick, 2014, p.52). "Researchers constantly move back and forth between data and theories and make comparisons and interpretations in searching for patterns and the best possible explanations" (Bryant, 2009; Carson, 2009; Eco, 1981; Thornberg, 2012; Truzzi,1976 as cited in Flick, 2014, p. 52). An abductive approach signifies using both inductive and deductive elements (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009). Deduction involves validating existing theories through research, whereas induction attempts to establish new theoretical concepts through empirical findings (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009). They also argue that the benefits of this approach stem from the synergies between deduction and induction by stating that abduction "alternates between theory and empirical facts whereby both are successively reinterpreted in the light of each other" (p.5). We chose an abductive approach as concepts such as leadership and employee sensemaking have a plethora of existing literature on which we can base ourselves on to analyze the novel context that startups with a hybrid find themselves in. Hence, by using existing literature we can develop new knowledge about the situation leaders of these types of organizations find themselves in. In this, we constantly switched between existing theory and our empirical material and tried to find the best possible explanations for the surprising phenomena we found. This approach allowed us to generate new knowledge and insights that contribute to theoretical understanding and practical implications.

Lastly, we have used a single case study to answer our research question. We chose this approach because, unlike other research approaches, case studies frequently go beyond examining, describing, or understanding phenomena, giving us a more nuanced analysis to answer our research question (Dyer & Wilkins, 1991). Moreover, contrary to multiple case studies, single cases allow the contribution and production of different and superior theories (Dyer & Wilkins, 1991), which we aimed to do. In the following chapter, we will dive deeper into data collection, in which we will describe the case, the sample, how we conducted the semi-structured interviews and the organizational document studies.

3.2 Data Collection

Data collection is the key aspect of qualitative research which involves gathering information and analyzing data to answer the research question or solve a specific research problem (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019; Mwita, 2022). However, it is essential to consider that, because of the use of interviews, "the influence of subjective beliefs is always, of necessity, a factor to consider" (Styhre, 2013, p.56). In the following section, we will first describe the studied organization to provide more context to our study. Furthermore, we will explain our chosen sample. Lastly, we will describe how we collected our empirical data by conducting semi-structured interviews and an organizational document study.

3.2.1 Case Description

The organization we partnered with is a scaleup software company headquartered in Quebec, Canada. With just over 150 employees, they have recently gone through considerable growth as a result of their Series B financing² round. The organization decided, in 2021, to officially roll out a flexible work policy providing freedom of choice in terms of work setting to employees. This made them ideal candidates for our study as they have created a fully hybrid workplace (Corporate blog, 2021).

Before diving into our process, it is worth mentioning that one of our team members is an ex-employee of the studied organization. This gave us advantages, including ease and willingness to collaborate and participants being more comfortable and trusting during calls. However, the fact that relationships were pre-established also can lead to biases by affecting interviewees' answers and our interpretations of them (Salazar, 1990).

3.2.2 Sample

As a primary step to conduct our interviews and minimize personal biases, we scheduled a meeting with our contact in the organization. In this meeting we explained our research and the implications that it would bring for the company. Then, we asked her to compile a list of potential candidates, which came down to forty available employees. From this list, we shortlisted participants that would be ideal for our study based on predetermined criteria that were relevant to our research question, which, according to Bell, Bryman and Harley (2019)

² "Series B financing is the second round of funding for a business through investment, including private equity investors and venture capitalists. Successive rounds of financing a business are consecutively termed Series A, Series B, and Series C financing. The Series B round generally takes place when the company has accomplished certain milestones in developing its business and is past the initial startup stage" (Smith, 2021, p.1).

refers to purposive sampling. Furthermore, as we identified and selected individuals for our interviews based on specific criteria, it refers to a subsection of purposive sampling which is called purposive criterion sampling (Shaheen, Pradhan & Ranajee, 2019). The criteria for selecting employees came down to having a varied sample based on roles and work settings. Our selection also considered the length of tenure and ensured that the genders were diverse and representative of the organization as a whole.

However, due to the list with forty candidates that we received by our contact, it could not only involve biases, but we also departed from selecting specific participants in the organization based on our criteria. This makes it important to mention that we did not exactly follow the theory of purposive criterion sampling. Indeed, since we were provided with a list of select individuals through our contact, our approach also leans towards some form of snowball sampling. In snowball sampling, the researcher establishes first contact with a select set of individuals who are relevant to the research subject and then uses them to get into contact with other individuals (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). Therefore “there is no accessible sampling frame for the population from which the sample is to be taken, and the difficulty of creating such a sampling frame means that such an approach is the only feasible one” (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019, p. 395).

After we decided who we wanted to interview, we asked our contact to inform these employees of our intention to include them in our study and provide some context. Once the initial reach-out was done and employees agreed, we contacted twenty employees via Slack³ to schedule interviews. Prior to the actual interviews, we decided to conduct two pilot interviews. Doing so allowed us to make adjustments and improve our question guide to be able to extract quality information from the following interviews. The end result was a 16-question guide, excluding follow-up questions, based on existing literature and therefore covered topics including leadership, culture, communication and engagement.

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³ “Slack is a messaging app for business that connects people to the information they need” (What is Slack, p.1).

to purposive sampling.

Furthermore, to be more specific, as we identified and selected individuals for our interviews based on specific criteria, it refers to a subsection of purposive sampling called purposive criterion sampling (Shaheen, Pradhan & Ranajee, 2019). The criteria for selecting employees came down to having a varied sample based on roles and work settings. Our selection also considered the length of tenure and ensured that the genders were diverse and representative of the organization.

As our participants were selected based on a list of forty candidates rather than the organization as a whole, this means two things. Firstly, biases from our contact person could have come into play when the list was created. Secondly, our approach did not precisely follow the theory of purposive criterion sampling. Our approach has some influence from snowball sampling because, through our contact, we were provided with references from individuals in the organization. With this sampling strategy, the researcher first establishes contact with a select set of individuals relevant to the research subject and then uses them to find subsequent participants (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). Indeed, we were provided with more individuals in the organization through our contact. Therefore “there is no accessible sampling frame for the population from which the sample is to be taken, and the difficulty of creating such a sampling frame means that such an approach is the only feasible one” (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019, p.395).

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When we began with the interviews, we did not know exactly how many interviews we had to do before collecting enough material for our research, which is in line with Bell, Bryman and Harley (2019), who state that it is impossible to estimate the number of interviews necessary before theoretical saturation comes. After the two pilot interviews, we conducted nine more. After analyzing that empirical data, we felt that we were at the point of

extensively exploring emerging notions and the lack of new theoretical discoveries based on new insights, also called theoretical saturation (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). To be certain that we had attained theoretical saturation, we planned two additional interviews—which confirmed our thought. Therefore, we graciously cancelled the other interviews we had scheduled. All in all, our sample came down to thirteen employees from different departments and work contexts (see Appendix 8.2).

3.2.3 Semi-Structured Interviews

Aligned with our qualitative interpretivist approach, we conducted semi-structured interviews by creating and encouraging a lively dialogue (Sayrs, 1998; Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). The flexibility of semi-structured interviews is particularly well suited for exploring and understanding phenomena in depth (Yin, 2018). It allows interviewers to adapt and dive deeper into interesting or surprising information shared by participants (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). This allowed us as researchers to depart from our interview guide and explore relevant topics that came up during conversations (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). Our role as researchers was to guide the conversation by maintaining its structure through follow-up inquiries while giving the respondents the flexibility to answer open-ended questions fully (McIntosh & Morse, 2015).

Before we started the interviews, we divided roles—one team member focused on leading the interviews by asking questions, guiding the interviewees and taking on the better part of interactions. This person ensured that participants felt comfortable answering the questions as truthfully as possible in total anonymity. The second person took charge of observations, whether the interviewee's body language, speaking style, or other potentially valuable information, which allowed us to better comprehend their responses and thoughts. Additionally, this person took notes and gave cues to guide the interviewer and ensure they were not missing out on any crucial points.

Every interview started with a short introduction about who we were and why we studied this topic. Even though we provided baseline information, we did not give too much away, which could steer interviewees' answers in a specific direction. The interviews lasted between 40 and 60 minutes, depending on how long their answers were. As our respondents were located in different parts of the world, we conducted our semi-structured interviews via Zoom for convenience. This allowed us to have a visual element to analyze non-verbal cues, provide visual support for clarification purposes and identify any discomfort from the participants

(McIntosh & Morse, 2015). In addition, Zoom has a recording function that allows us to replay and listen to a respondent's answers and carefully analyze body language (Zoom, 2023).

3.2.4 Organizational Documents Study

In addition to the semi-structured interviews, we conducted document studies which are highly appropriate for our qualitative case study (Bowen, 2009). Document studies allow the researcher to discover valuable insights, meanings and understandings relating to the research topic (Merriam, 1988, as cited in Bowen, 2009). Hence, not only does a document analysis enable us to formulate relevant interview questions, but it also provides us with a better understanding of our interviewees' answers, leading to a more thorough data analysis (Bowen, 2009).

One of the documents consisted of the organization's culture book, which is available online and accessible to individuals outside the organization. The culture book defines what culture is and what it means to the organization and presents their five core values as an employer. It also includes quotes from organizational leaders who express their thoughts on culture and leadership. The culture book is a public statement of the organization's commitment to employees created by leaders in collaboration with their employees. The other document study consisted of the employee survey conducted by the organization to gather their opinions regarding remote and office work as well as their overall workplace satisfaction. Based on the survey results, the organization implemented the flexible work policy as this is what employees desired. They believe it would also benefit the organization, especially regarding recruitment and talent accessibility.

Combining different types of data - semi-structured interviews and organizational documentation - enabled us to perform what is known as triangulation which is "the combination of methodologies in the study of the same phenomenon" (Denzin, 1970, p.291, as cited in Bowen, 2009). He states that extracting evidence from different sources creates a higher credibility level as it reduces biases' impact.

3.3 Data Analysis

Before starting the interviews, we asked the interviewees' permission to record the interviews while informing them that everything would be anonymized. This allowed us to transcribe the

results accurately and double-check important information. After we finished the interviews, we used our recordings to transcribe the data with the help of transcribing software. After this, we coded the data, which resulted in identifying, organizing and building theory (Williams & Moser, 2019). During the coding process, we divided the roles so that the person who conducted the interview also did the coding to interpret the data best. To double-check the codings, we read each other's codings and adjusted them when necessary.

Additionally, we decided to focus on an open, axial and selecting coding strategy to extract the information needed to articulate our findings. This strategy enabled an evolving data loop in which we compare, reduce and consolidate extracted data (Williams & Moser, 2019). Williams and Moser (2019) also state that this approach is required to develop a deeper theoretical meaning. Strauss and Corbin (1990) distinguish three types of coding practice. The first level, open coding, is used to identify distinct concepts and themes for categorization (Williams & Moser, 2019). Our list included codes such as barriers due to the work context, conflicts, feelings of isolation, positive coworker relationships, lack of vision and strategy, and task-oriented leadership, to name a few. Going through our codes enabled us to extract similar codes, which brought us to the second level, axial coding, which "focuses on identifying, refining, aligning and categorizing emergent themes" (Williams & Moser, 2019, p. 50). Axial coding identifies relationships between the open codes, resulting in supported evidence. This level will thus produce distinct thematic categories and a solid setup for selective coding (Williams & Moser, 2019). The thematic categories we extracted included communication, relationships, culture and leadership. In the third level, selective coding, we selected and integrated specific categories of the data of axial coding and matched these categories to other themes to construct meaning and refine data which eventually provided us with specific themes such as leadership communication sensemaking and employee flexibility in engagement.

4. Findings

For this analysis, we conducted a document analysis of the organization's culture book, employee survey results, and 13 semi-structured interviews. The culture book, the epicentre to which all leadership and human resources (HR) documentation refers, maps out the company's leadership approach and illustrates how they aim to treat and interact with employees. It is a public manifesto of the organization's commitment to employees created by the head of HR in collaboration with the leadership team composed of the founders and

their team of Vice Presidents (VPs). On the other hand, the employee surveys were conducted before establishing their flexible work policy to get a pulse on the organization and understand employees' thoughts about remote work, office work and their general appreciation of the workplace. Lastly, the interviews were conducted using employees from various departments and levels. Furthermore, our interviewees had a wide range of work contexts, from fully remote in a different country to mostly remote and living in the city where offices are based to mostly in-office.

4.1 Communication

Communication was a recurrent theme throughout our empirical material, affecting leaders and employees. An employee's work context can cause significant communication obstacles—especially when working remotely. Indeed, employees away from the office have more difficulty keeping up with what is happening in the organization and getting updates on all the shared information. This reality creates challenges for both the employee and the leaders. Additionally, a lack of communication can lead to employees believing they do not have a say in the decision-making process and that once a plan is put into action, it is not correctly implemented or even explained to them.

4.1.1 Communication Barriers - I Can't Hear You, There Is Too Much Noise!

Employees who are not physically in the office face communication barriers. They have expressed finding themselves lagging behind coworkers regarding crucial organizational information, which is often relayed through office chatter before being officially announced in company-wide meetings. In the office, there is room to chat with others and discuss what is happening in the organization—which is more difficult to do remotely.

"I think it's normal in the context that we are a remote first company. But sometimes there is maybe communication problem—certain information we simply don't know. But I think it comes with the fact that we are remote and we are not all together at the office." - Maura

"I think I definitely miss out on some of those conversations, right [...] Just being in the know, you always hear things after they decide. Oftentimes you're like, oh, gosh, I didn't know that. I didn't hear that before. So there's a delay in how that information trickles down for sure." -

Peter

As stated by Maura, while this situation is normal for a hybrid organization, there is still room for improvement. Making sure communications are strong would mitigate the adverse effects on employees such as Peter, who has been surprised by some announcements in the past because he did not know what was in the works before the official announcement—he felt things came out of nowhere. International remote workers have expressed additional complexities related to their work setting. They have repeatedly pointed out the challenges of being based in a different timezone. As most international workers find themselves in Europe, six hours ahead of the headquarters, these employees only have a two-hour overlap during a typical workday, leading to communication and collaboration barriers. One of the European employees expressed that his manager is on-call as of 6 AM in case he needs emergency support with a customer.

"He's always available even in hours that are not North American hours. If I need him at 6am he's there to help." - Samuel

While Samuel appreciated his manager's efforts, it did not mean that his coworkers did the same and were available so early in the morning. If he wants to collaborate with other employees, he has to schedule meetings in advance—he cannot rely on impromptu calls or messages via Slack. Another remote employee, Lorenzo, has also stated blocking off the last two hours of his day, which he calls the red zone, to chat with colleagues as this is the only part of the day his schedule overlaps with his North American counterparts. Another worker also shared the importance of wisely using Slack when working in another timezone.

"One of my colleagues was in the UK. If he asks a question at eight o'clock in the morning, it can easily get buried under six newer messages because I start my day six hours later. You need to time your messages properly and send them in the right place. So you need to have a sniper approach, you need to be at the right place at the right time to ask your questions." - Rosalie

As Rosalie expressed in the above quote, if her coworker in the UK sends a message too early or too late in the working day, it can quickly get buried under a mountain of other inquiries—leading to it being unanswered and forgotten. With employees from different provinces and countries working for a French-Canadian organization comes another barrier, language. Indeed, the founders are native French speakers, and the primary language used

throughout the organization is French—mostly in informal contexts. In some instances, even on company-wide channels, French is used, which forces some employees to translate the messages to understand. This made some of our interviewees feel disrespected or left out of conversations.

"Be a little bit more respectful for the fact that not everyone speaks French, I think it's a challenge sometimes. And, you know, I'm not the kind of person to be like, Hey, man, can you speak English for the one guy in the room? It's fine, I get it, but it's also what starts to exclude you from conversations." - Jonathan

As stated by Jonathan, he does not want to be the one who tells others which language to speak. On the other hand, he also feels it should not be too much to ask to use English—even if there is only one non-French speaker in a meeting. This issue often arises in cross-departmental meetings as some departments only have native French speakers and are not used to using any other languages. Lastly, not having the ability to speak French is seen by some of our interviewees as a glass ceiling. They believe this language barrier will prevent them from reaching certain organizational levels.

In this section, we discussed the organization's different communication barriers— mainly relating to remote workers. Employees have expressed lagging behind in organizational information, difficulty staying informed, and limited opportunities for impromptu discussions. International remote workers face additional complexities, such as time zone differences and language barriers, impacting collaboration and inclusion.

4.1.2 Communication Channels - Should This Be A Slack Message, Email or Meeting?

Sharing information within the organization is mainly done through the messaging platform Slack. In Slack, one can find different channels with specific purposes, including but not limited to departmental discussions, customer projects, and product updates. Leaders are often members of many channels to keep an overview of what is going on throughout the organization. On the other hand, employees have access to a limited number of channels that usually concern them directly.

"We got messages from other teams that were not aware of what happened that specific week, because everything was happening on Slack channels, and those channels are private. So a lot of people were okay, what were they talking about? What is it about?" - Marcel

As expressed by Marcel, employees rarely find themselves in another department's chats—creating barriers to cross-departmental collaboration. This leads to employees being ill-informed about other departments' projects and tasks, creating friction. Another challenge regarding Slack is the sheer volume of messages. Many channels are disorganized and composed of a mix of work-related messages of different levels of importance as well as informal discussions about everything and nothing. One interviewee stated receiving criticism for not seeing and acknowledging messages. Overall, many interviewees said keeping track of messages was difficult, especially considering the lack of clarity regarding what is a priority and what is not.

"So you can have a super important message. And then right after you have someone asking, Hey, what do you want to wear? Do you want to go out for lunch? It's hard as an employee to understand what is really important or not." - Rosalie

The situation described by Rosalie often presents itself on large company-wide chats. Employees send messages on these channels to reach a large audience and thus, in theory, increase their chances of getting an answer to their messages. However, as stated above, messages often go unanswered as they are diluted in a sea of other inquiries. Moving forward, another communication hurdle regarding Slack is the interpretation of the meaning of messages. Employees' work context and tenure affected their ability to interpret particular messages. Office workers, especially those in the organization since its early days, had greater context and knowledge of who leaders are as individuals, leading to less misinterpretation. It is more difficult to understand the emotions and intentions behind a message through online mediums—communications could easily be seen as negative even though they were not meant to be. This has been expressed by multiple interviewees, especially in the context of receiving messages from the founders and other leaders.

"Sometimes employees who are at the bottom of the hierarchy like me, receive Slacks from the top level and don't understand why. Sometimes I think it's not their position anymore because we are too big." - Marcel

"And I feel like that's one thing that has been a real pain in my team last in the you know, the last few months is that if you have like, aggressive message from management, but you don't see that once the message is sent, that person is smiling, and it's all good." - Rosalie

Indeed, there is often misinterpretation when it comes to Slack messages coming from leaders. As Marcel points out, leaders have to realize the organization is growing. They no longer have to get involved in day-to-day activities and act like CEOs by focusing on big-picture items. As we will elaborate on in our section "Leader-Employee Relationships", as the company grew and more and more employees were remote-based, the bonds between leaders and employees became weaker.

"There was one incident (on Slack) where maybe the CEO didn't realize the weight of his words. As the company grows, he's a CEO, and people regard him as a CEO [...] I know him, I know what his message means but sometimes he forgets that now he doesn't have the same familiarity level with 150-200 people. Sometimes his words will be seen by other points of view, and then it will really affect the people receiving these messages." - Lorenzo

As we can see from Lorenzo's statement, the fact that employees and leaders do not know each other personally makes it challenging to interpret messages sent via Slack. While this is a specific example, many messages have been misinterpreted due to a lack of context and weaker leader-employee relationships.

All in all, the extensive use of an instant messaging platform such as Slack presents several challenges, including limited cross-departmental collaboration and difficulty prioritizing and keeping track of important information due to volume and disorganization. Moreover, as the organization grows, the context and familiarity between leaders and employees diminish, resulting in messages from leaders being misinterpreted and potentially affecting employees negatively.

4.2 Leader-Employee Relationships

As demonstrated in the last section on communication, the relationship employees have with the leadership team directly impacts their daily lives. In our studied scaleup organization,

tenure appears to be an essential factor in how close employees are to leaders and how accessible they are to them. This is mainly because the longer someone has been in the organization, the smaller the team was when they were hired, making it easier to establish personal bonds. In addition, the pandemic further exacerbated this distance created by scaling as many new hires who would have been in the office and face-to-face with leaders did not have that opportunity. However, while this could have been balanced with a full-time return to the office following COVID-19, the flexible work policy has led to low in-office attendance for employees in the vicinity of the offices. Furthermore, it has also led the HR-department to expand their hiring pool by bringing in employees living in different areas of the country and even the world on a fully remote basis.

4.2.1 Employee Tenure - Who's That? Oh That's Tim, He's New Here

As previously stated, our studied organization is a scaleup that has been going through high levels of growth following their series B investment round. With this growth came a large influx of new employees as the company needed more manpower to meet demand and scale at a pace that followed the expectations of investors and customers.

"One thing that I'll say though is that we grew very, very quickly." - Chris

Not only did the organization grow very quickly, as mentioned by Chris, but the increase in personnel came in early 2021, at the height of the pandemic. This created a challenge for the organization and meant that all new employees started their tenure away from the office as well as the leadership team.

"At the time we were hiring a lot. And we were kind of stuck sometime because it was in 2021." - Helene

This meant that not only was it more difficult for leaders and employees to establish relationships due to the sheer growth of the team, the physical distance made it that much more difficult. As Helene mentioned, they were stuck. For many employees, it took months to get any face-to-face contact with leaders and getting to know an individual fully through platforms such as Zoom can be challenging—but more on the impact of work setting in the following section.

While many employees were hired during the scaleup phase, this was not the case for everyone. Indeed, some of our interviewees have been working for the organization for several years and have witnessed its growth firsthand. Being in the company for so long and going through the more difficult early startup stage with a small group of employees has allowed them to establish strong and personal relationships with leaders and founders.

"And also a special case in my, for me is like the previous links made before in Montreal. Like if I have a problem, like if I would have a problem or have to change something I speak directly to the CEO, I don't speak to HR." - Lorenzo

As Lorenzo mentions, his situation is unique. The fact that he now works on a different continent has mitigated the negative effects of working remotely. The personal ties he previously established when he was living in Montreal and working in-office during the startup stage provide him with a direct line to the founders—a luxury most employees with a similar work context or even position do not have.

Furthermore, with growth came more and more organizational layers that distanced employees from leaders. In the startup phase, it is easier to establish closer relationships with founders as there is a higher level of collaboration and more informal touchpoints between leaders and their teams. Now, with over 150 individuals, it is much more challenging to establish these bonds with everyone.

"As the company grows, employees regard the founder as a CEO. It isn't like when we're 50 and we're eating at the lunch table together and we're giving shit to each other [...] But now, sometimes I think he forgets that he doesn't have this familiarity level with 150-200 people." - Lorenzo

Indeed, now that the organization is significantly larger, employees expressed that the familiarity level had decreased. This discrepancy in closeness between employees created a feeling that not everyone was treated equally. Employees expressed that they do not know leaders personally. In our interviews, newer employees mentioned that they felt the company's growth created an inner circle at the top. This inner circle is composed of leaders and employees who have been in the organization for a long time and were able to establish these relationships.

"When you're there for a long time, there starts to be this inner circle type of situation that happens. Unless you're part of that immediate inner circle, you're not part of the conversation. I've kind of recognized that pretty early, I know where the buck stops with the opinions that I have. [...] Because it's either gonna be met with no response, or it's just kind of like, dude, stop talking—without actually saying it explicitly. I know that opinions are not gonna go much further. I don't feel that that openness exists beyond that inner circle sometimes." - Jonathan

As Jonathan explains, he feels left out and unfairly treated and that his opinions are not taken as seriously or even dismissed simply due to the fact that he is not able to create a level of trust and connection with leaders—rather than having his points of view judged based on the quality of the input.

To conclude the above findings, the organization experienced rapid growth in recent years, with a significant employee increase. The expansion began in early 2021 amid the pandemic, which posed additional challenges as new employees started their tenure away from the office and leaders. The physical distance made it difficult for leaders and employees to establish relationships. While some long-term employees had the advantage of personal connections with leaders and founders, newer employees felt excluded and unequally treated, perceiving an inner circle at the top that limited their involvement and impact.

4.2.2 Employee Work Setting - Out of Sight, Out of Mind

In addition to the organization's growth, it appears that creating a hybrid workplace is also a considerable hurdle to establishing relationships. Indeed, not only did a flexible work policy bring in workers from across the globe, but it also resulted in office attendance never returning to pre-pandemic levels. This was expected by leaders as, before COVID-19, the organization had a strict policy regarding remote work.

"So actually COVID happens. Before that, we were very strict about working remotely It was not possible to work from home. [...] Then COVID happened and everyone noticed how it was easy, and everyone worked well." - Helene

As mentioned in the above quote, many employees got used to remote work's benefits. This is why the flexible work policy was established in the first place. In the employee surveys sent out to get a pulse on individuals' desires regarding the work context of the organization, 76 percent of respondents claimed that they would favour showing up to the office 2-3 times per week.

Factor	Question	Percentage Score	Population	Favorable	Neutral	Unfavorable
First Factor	In the event of a possible return to the office, I would like to work physically 5 days at the office and would commit to this	4%	79	4%	19%	77%
First Factor	In the event of a possible return to the office, I would prefer to only work from home and never work physically from the office	16%	79	16%	17%	67%
First Factor	In the event of a possible return to the office, I would like to work physically at the office 2-3 days depending of my schedule	76%	80	76%	15%	9%
First Factor	In the event of a possible return to the office, I would like to work physically at the office a maximum of 1 day per week	37%	79	37%	20%	43%
First Factor	In the event of a possible return to the office, I would like to work physically at the office 4 days a week	16%	79	16%	23%	61%

Source: Employee survey results document

However, in practice, this is not the case, as many people who live in proximity of an office do not show up at all or just once every few weeks. Indeed, one of our interviewees, who usually goes to the office four times per week, has expressed that the office is virtually empty on most days.

"After the pandemic, like, you know, like I said, the office, it's quite empty. Five people, on average, in Montreal, and I think in Montreal, we are more than 80 or 90 people in total, so people are not coming to the office anymore." - Marcel

Leaders never expected attendance levels to be so low, especially since survey results pointed towards having employees show up at the office multiple times per week. Seeing how it all unfolded in practice, they are now attempting to find ways to bring people back to the office.

"Yes, I would say there is some downsides about it. So this is why we're kind of trying to get the people back to the office. We don't want to we don't want to obligate them to come back, but we want to make them want to go back [...] We feel that if we would go back to full time in office, or if we would just ask the employees to go to the office two days a week, we think some will leave the company." - Helene

As expressed by Helene, the organization is attempting to bring employees back into the office as they see its negative effects on the organization—more on that in the section "Do You Not Want Free Snacks And Coffee." However, they want to do so without abolishing or modifying the flexible work policy as they believe doing so would lead to employees leaving the organization. Indeed, this is based on their employee survey that led to the flexible work policy, where 24% of respondents said they would consider leaving the organization, and 69% would be unhappy if the work-from-home policy was not very flexible. While the term "not be very flexible" is up for interpretation and vague, it does give a good idea of employees' desires and intentions.

Factor	Question	Percentage Score	Population	Favorable	Neutral	Unfavorable
In the event that work from home would not be very flexible	In the event that our work from home policy would not be very flexible, I could consider leaving the company	24%	80	24%	40%	36%
In the event that work from home would not be very flexible	In the event that our work from home policy would not be very flexible, I would not be bothered at all	8%	80	8%	19%	73%
In the event that work from home would not be very flexible	In the event that our work from home policy would not be very flexible, I would not be happy about it	69%	80	69%	23%	8%

Source: Employee survey results document

This puts them in a difficult situation because the flexible work policy, which prevents employees from leaving, is also harming their organization. To add to the complexity of the situation, the organization began hiring people from across the globe on a fully remote basis after implementing the flexible work policy. Doing so allowed them to expand their talent pool. However, this also means that many geographically distant employees have never met most of the leaders, except possibly during company-wide events that occur twice a year.

"People work remotely and don't have that personal interaction with those executives." -

Marcel

While the prevailing situation is executives having employees based in different geographical locations, which, in turn, limits face-to-face touchpoints, as expressed by Marcel, another unique context came up in our interviews. Indeed, one of the organization's leaders is based in Europe, meaning that his employees are not far from him, but rather he is far away from them. This situation is unique because rather than being a Canadian-based leader who can have personal interactions with other leaders and manage some of the employees remotely, this individual cannot collaborate in person with anyone.

"How do you build that connection? And this is a big problem [...] he accepted to manage people in Canada, from Europe. And I think this comes already with his own challenge. So a lot of his team is not so happy with that. Not with him but in the fact that he doesn't have time. [...] So it's just interesting with the timezone problems" - Marcel

As stated by Marcel, this is not only proving to be a challenge to establish relationships due to the distance but also because of the six-hour time difference, which means there is only a two-hour overlap in his day with subordinates. As expressed in our communication findings, time zones present an important barrier—especially for collaborative work. A lack of collaboration time creates friction between coworkers, and when it comes to leader relationships, it leads to employee dissatisfaction.

Overall, the organization's flexible work policy has created challenges in establishing relationships between leaders and employees. While surveys indicated that employees favoured a situation where they would be in-office 2-3 times per week, in practice, many employees who live near the office rarely show up. Leaders did not anticipate such low attendance levels and are now attempting to find ways to encourage employees to come back. However, they believe eliminating the flexible work policy could lead to employee attrition. Additionally, the organization's decision to hire remote workers from around the globe has further limited face-to-face interactions and personal connections between leaders and employees.

4.3 Employee Engagement

Throughout our interviews, we gained more knowledge and understanding about why and how employees in the organization are engaged. We uncovered that freedom and flexibility and work-life balance influence employee engagement and are regarded as priorities in employees' eyes. These factors increased trust and a stronger bond between leaders and employees. This relationship and its strength significantly influenced cross-departmental collaboration and collaborative work. Lastly, we gained a deeper understanding of employees' challenges regarding the limited career opportunities.

4.3.1 Employee Relationships

Interaction with other organizational members is very important for our interviewees, especially those working from the office. Many office workers have established real

friendships with colleagues, built mainly through informal interactions such as morning coffee chit-chat, lunch breaks and after-work drinks.

“A work friend that you really get along with and you can laugh with. You can say everything you want about culture and salary, and of course that matters but I feel like having friends and having fun with the people you work with is the best. I remember I read that the happiest employees and best cultures are the ones where when you walk in the office, you hear laughter and I think that’s true. You have some people you can laugh with. It really matters.”

- Rosie

As explained by Rosie, the office is a place that helps lighten up her day through fun and laughter—as opposed to strictly focusing on work, as is the case when working remotely. Indeed, remote workers say it is sometimes hard to establish these relationships without face-to-face interactions. One of our interviewees, Marcel, has seen both sides of the coin in this organization. Currently, he works four days per week at the office but was hired during the pandemic, which meant that he was working on a fully remote basis. Even though he expressed that he is not looking for friends at the office, he does value creating relationships and building bonds with colleagues, which was a challenge when he was first hired.

“That’s important, at least for me at work, to be able to create bonds with people. Even if they’re not becoming friends, because I’m not looking for friends when coming to work, but I like creating real bonds with coworkers. I think it’s hard when you’re 100% remote.” -

Marcel

Other interviewees shared the same opinion as Marcel, which is why many departments organize occasional Zoom calls dedicated to informal conversations. These calls allow employees who cannot attend the office to have more informal and relationship-building discussions with their team. However, they are often very superficial and do not allow them to get to know colleagues on a more personal level. On an organizational level, to provide employees with face-to-face time with their colleagues, leaders organize bi-annual events to bring everyone from around the globe together. While our interviewees appreciate these get-togethers and believe they bring people closer together, the personal unfamiliarity between coworkers can be felt.

“Work events are the moments where you can speak about something different than work. It's the first time you talked about things other than work, it's where you discover other people. Okay, oh, you play the guitar? Okay, you were in a Facebook group. Okay, we've been working together for a year and a half and I didn't know that part of your life. And I think that these things you learn after two weeks of work at the coffee machine.” - Marcel

As expressed by Marcel, seeing how people interact during these events, it is evident that they have not established personal bonds as general discomfort and shyness prevail. Having team members spread out in different regions creates a barrier to getting to know others on a deeper level, even if they have known each other for years.

To sum up, the office environment plays a significant role in building relationships between coworkers. However, remote workers often struggle to establish these connections without face-to-face interactions. While occasional Zoom calls are organized for more informal conversations, they tend to be superficial and do not allow for deeper personal connections. This is especially evident during company-wide events where there is an apparent unfamiliarity even though many people have known each other for years.

4.3.2 Cross-Departmental Collaboration - Apparently, There Is An ‘I’ In Team

Most employees in the organization work with others in some way—either with colleagues or external stakeholders. However, according to our interviews, the level of collaborative work greatly depends on the position they hold. Certain departments have to collaborate with each other because the work processes depend on the other team, while other teams are more isolated. However, due to the low levels of collaboration it creates a feeling of isolation for some employees—as seen in the case of Anne-Floor. Even though she gets an update on what other teams do every month, she only sees the surface level and still does not know what is happening in other departments due to the lack of interaction. This increases the feeling of working in a silo for her, and because she is working remotely, this is extra compounded.

"I think it's more collaboration with the different teams that we would have to improve. Sometimes, we kind of work in our own silos. So even though we get visibility to what every team has done that month, we don't really know what's going on. If we don't have to interact with the team, we don't really interact with them. Since we are remote, I don't see you and I can't really walk across the room to where you are and kind of learn a bit more. So there's a bit of separation there." - Anne-Floor

Not only is this seen as negative by Anne-Floor, but also the leaders have noticed the negative results of employees that work in silos. To resolve this issue, the HR-department initiated a program called "Walk a Mile", allowing employees to shadow another employee in a different department. In doing so, employees better understand what other employees are doing, which is eventually beneficial for cross-departmental collaboration. However, some employees, such as Chris, make the decision themselves to not interact and discuss with colleagues all the time. They indicate that they enjoy working individually as they are not constantly disturbed by others and avoid any collaboration they do not deem necessary.

"But to be honest with you I can go for a week without discussing with any other colleagues, apart from maybe my boss. So collaboration is nice, and I think it adds extra value to what we do. But you know, I could go rogue and be my myself." - Chris

All in all, the level of collaboration in the organization varies. Some employees like to work individually to avoid distractions, and others do want to collaborate with others but are limited due to their work setting. Furthermore, some employees even experience isolation due to the lack of collaboration with other employees in other departments. The HR department recognized the adverse effects of this. They therefore introduced the program "Walk a Mile", to foster cross-departmental collaboration by allowing employees to shadow colleagues in other teams.

4.3.3 Freedom & Flexibility - I Want To Break Free

Another important aspect for employees is having the freedom and flexibility to arrange their own day in the way they want to. Employees feel that leaders provide much flexibility and give employees a feeling of taking responsibility for their tasks. As stated by Maura and Lorenzo, in addition to having the flexibility to visit the office whenever they choose, they feel that their leaders respect the fact that they also have a personal life in which, when

something inconvenient happens, they get the time and the discretion to handle it in their way.

"I really like freedom. I want to be able to decide if one week I want to go to the office five days and another week stay and work remotely five days. I think they are really good with flexibility and also in your work and also at home and the balance with your personal life and work." - Maura

"And I feel they respect the fact that you need to balance your work in your life, and you have a different schedule." - Lorenzo

As stated in the above quotes, some employees feel unrestricted and unmonitored in work-life balance and dealing with personal issues. However, this is not always the case. Regarding tasks and projects, leaders are result-driven and strive to be the best in their field. This is especially evident when Kim, a remote worker, described an instance when a leader sent a message via Slack that she interpreted as threatening. He told employees they should not take advantage of the organization's "Flexible Friday" policy unless they met their targets.

"But sometimes they'll get frustrated and they'll bite and bark a little bit [...] [they] post on Slack about the fact that if you're not meeting your targets, you shouldn't dare be using your Flexible Fridays" - Kim

This situation makes it clear that achieving targets is seen as more important than work-life balance in some situations. Additionally, as stated by Rosalie, another aspect that is important for her is that leaders have to stop looking over everybody's shoulder and instead start delegating. Since the organization is growing, employees feel that leaders have to realize that they can not keep managing the organization as they did before, when the organization only had 50 employees.

"And they can do their job a little bit better, instead of always looking over everybody's shoulder. But it's not from bad intentions. It's just that, of course, when you're 30, you have almost three roles at the same time, like you are the CEO, and you are the CTO when you allocate everything at once. We are just big enough that having more people with more responsibilities would maybe be best for everybody in the end." – Rosalie

"Sometimes I do feel there's a bit of an excessive micromanagement, he really tries to take you from every step" - Samuel

Employees feel that leaders do not have the time to control everything happening in the organization. Moreover, they feel like the leaders have to adapt to the growth of the organization and manage the organization by delegating more. By doing this, employees feel the responsibility, and this will increase the independence of employees, which is seen as crucial by employees.

To wrap up, in this section, we uncovered that employees highly value that leaders provide them with freedom and flexibility and respect the need for work-life balance. However, there are instances where achieving targets is prioritized over work-life balance. Additionally, employees express a desire for leaders to delegate more and refrain from micromanaging. As the organization grows, employees believe that leaders need to delegate more and trust their team members to handle their responsibilities independently, which, in turn, will allow leaders to focus on more important things.

4.3.4 Career Development - Walking In Place

Our interviewees have described the organization as relatively flat, which is perceived as limiting professional growth. Many employees have said management opportunities are minimal and the only development opportunities are lateral.

"There's also a lot of opportunities internally but they are not necessarily vertical, mostly horizontal. I would just switch departments and start again from scratch. It's not like I'm necessarily growing vertically in my role." - Rosalie

As pointed out by Rosalie, there are no opportunities to grow vertically in her function. She added that, while she does not have her eyes set on a management position, for others who do, this poses a turnover risk for the organization. However, some employees have pointed out potential strategies to mitigate this risk. Indeed, Marcel has pointed out that the developers have a system that enables progression without changing roles.

"Developers can reach level 1, 2, 3, then become architects and it's clear." - Marcel

Marcel believes this creates more certainty and a feeling of progression without becoming a manager. Individuals strive to increase levels because it raises one's seniority level, responsibilities and salary. Unfortunately, this path is only available for developers and not for the other employees in the organization. Additionally, as the organization is a scaleup, which means they are expanding, there is much uncertainty regarding career growth. Indeed, many opportunities for advancement may not even exist at this stage.

"My VP was talking about the fact that some people were frustrated that there's no growth path. I understand it's a scaleup and there aren't always defined roles, there's no set steps." -

Kim

As described by Kim, even though employees are aware of the realities of working in a scaleup, there is still frustration among employees. Many have expressed that the only way to grow vertically is to wait for a manager to leave the organization or stay long enough so that the growth in personnel puts them in a management position by default.

All in all, the organization is described as flat, offering limited opportunities for professional growth. Employees feel that management positions are scarce and only lateral development options are available. However, employees have shared potential strategies to resolve this issue, such as providing levels to positions. Lastly, while understanding the challenges of working in a scaleup, many employees still express frustration about the lack of clear growth paths.

4.4 Organizational Culture, Vision and Strategy

The founders significantly impact the organization's culture as their values are reflected in how they run the company. The culture book, which contains the company's foundational values, aligns with the recurring values expressed by our interviewees, including family values, work-life balance, and flexibility. However, concerns were raised regarding the flexible work policy as it has led to low attendance rates in the office, which some employees feel is hurting the culture. Furthermore, it is believed that the organization's growth has also played a role in the culture shift. Lastly, employees expressed the importance of leaders with a vision for the company and can sell a dream that will make them want to be a part of the

journey. However, this has not always been properly done by the organization's leaders, which has led to some mistrust and perception of lack of transparency from employees.

4.4.1 Organizational Culture - Do You Not Want Free Snacks And Coffee?

When discussing the organization's culture, we found that in most cases, interviewees would describe it through the founders, the CEO and CTO. Our interviewees have expressed that they strongly and directly impact the organization's culture. Indeed, their values appear to reflect how they run the organization. In many cases, their personal values are the same as the organization's values which shapes the type of culture in place.

"The culture is really aligned with the CEO, and in general, he has really good values. Like, he's a good guy. He wants the best for everybody [...] You can see it through the organization and the repercussions that it has. They're also young (the founders), so they understand so much more about work-life balance, and flexibility." - Lorenzo

"The co-founders have a lot of influence on the culture. The CEO is a family man, he sometimes brings his children to work, it's very important for him. So what that translates into is a lot of flexibility for parents." - Rosie

As stated by Rosie and Lorenzo, work-life balance, flexibility and family are three values that the founders take to heart. These statements are aligned with the organization's culture book, which shares the founders' thoughts about culture and expresses the organization's foundational values. Indeed, when it comes to family values, the culture book states the following, "We are a family. And, as a family, we support each other in the good times as well as in the bad times. We celebrate our successes together. We face the vagaries of life together. And we move forward together." Furthermore, the values of work-life balance and flexibility are also demonstrated in the document, "We also believe that happiness and well-being at work comes a lot from the quality of the work-life balance and this is why we give our people all the autonomy, space and flexibility they need to thrive."

While all our interviewees have expressed positive feelings towards the organization's values, many were concerned with how the flexible work policy was affecting the culture. As previously expressed in our relationship findings, the office has meager attendance rates as many employees work from home even though they live in proximity to one of the offices.

"I think the culture was very strong. After the pandemic, like I said, the office is quite empty [...] People are not coming to the office anymore and I think that it's killing the culture." -

Marcel

As mentioned by Marcel, the office played an important role in the culture—it was the catalyst of the strong culture that once was in place in the organization. This is one of the reasons why, during the pandemic, leaders decided to renovate one of their offices and hire an office manager. The offices offer many perks such as free coffee, snacks and occasional meals, comfortable working stations and conference rooms, to name a few.

"It's a shame that not more people benefit from the office. The founders did a great job at putting in place a very motivating work environment where we're treated with great coffee, snacks and everything." - Chris

Interviewees have told us that the leaders share the same feeling as Chris and have repeatedly expressed dissatisfaction with the low attendance rates. However, our interviews have also revealed that while the founders often show up at the office, the same cannot be said of other members of the leadership team.

"I think that if management was at the office first, that would help. Because it's not always the case. Like, even the HR team is not at the office and I think that they should because they are the ones complaining that no one is coming to the office, but should come at least twice a week. If they would show up, people would come I'm sure." - Marcel

Marcel believes that if leaders were more present and led by example, it would encourage people to return to the office and increase attendance rates. However, while employees' presence at the office is partly due to the flexible work policy, employees expressed that the organization's growth also strongly influences this culture shift. Furthermore, as this flexible work policy came into place during the very high-growth period of the organization, the culture itself naturally evolved and cannot go back to what it once was.

"I'm not sure if it's really about the remote work or not, it was quite a different company at that time, because we were 60 employees. And we really had this high growth very quickly, where we were 150 employees. So the cultures change a lot, because before that. It used to be that everyone was super close, everyone really knew each other. And they were very close together. And then when we hired a lot of people at the same time." - Helene

Helene's comments resonate a lot with what was discussed about how the organization's growth affected leader-employee relationships. As the organization grows and more and more people come into it, the culture will evolve with it. It will not be the same as it once was with a tight-knit group.

To wrap up, our findings demonstrate that the founders significantly influence the organization's culture, with their personal values being at the forefront. However, some interviewees expressed concerns about the impact of the flexible work policy on the culture, as office attendance rates have significantly decreased. The low attendance rates and lack of presence from the leadership team have contributed to the shift in culture. The organization's growth also plays a role in this cultural shift as the dynamics in the organization change.

4.4.2 Vision & Strategy - Reach For The Stars...But Which One?

Having a vision has been expressed by many interviewees as one of the most important traits they look for in a leader. This trait was also not contingent on whether the interviewee was a remote or office worker, employees with different work contexts expressed the same sentiment. They want forward-looking leaders who sell a dream that will make individuals want to jump in and feel a part of the journey.

"Definitely, they have to be forward looking. They have to give everyone a vision to work towards." - Kim

"I would just need someone who I trust, and a vision, I would like to follow. I mean, I just would like to have someone selling the dream, a little bit. So this is our objective in 10 years. And I (the leader) am passionate about it and I share it with my company and my employees and I will do whatever we need to succeed." - Marcel

While employees such as Kim and Marcel have expressed the importance they give to having a leader who has a vision and shares it with employees, it also appears that this is easier said than done. Indeed, our interviewees have expressed mixed messages regarding the leaders' ability to communicate a vision with them. While it was clear and well transmitted for some, most expressed that there was a lack of clarity on this front. The HR team has repeatedly received feedback through employee surveys that leaders needed to work on developing and sharing a vision.

"We got a lot of questions from employees, like, what's the vision? What are we working on? So we felt like it was unclear for a lot of employees." - Rosie

"Yeah, this is something that we had a hard time with. I think with the growth of the company, a lot of things change. And we were at this at a certain point where I think the vision was not so well communicated by the founders and VPs. And so this is something that the employees told us, and we really wanted to address [...] So this was something employees were kind of complaining about that they didn't know, what was the vision where we were heading. They were a bit all mixed. I could say I was too, it wasn't so clear to me, even if, like I was aware of the discussion, but sometimes it changed." - Helene

As we can see by these quotes, the employee surveys opened the eyes of the leadership team and pushed them to consider this feedback and take action. However, the damage had already been done. The lack of communication led some employees to believe there were transparency issues from the leadership team. Indeed, multiple interviewees have expressed mistrust regarding the leaders' true intentions in the long run.

"I think that's probably one of the only points of contention I have with the organization is that I feel like they're not super transparent about their long term vision. You know, they're there. I'm sure there is a long-term vision. It's just I don't feel like they're very open about that. And I don't know if that's because I'm not in the office or if it's just something that wasn't effectively communicated, but all the instances where I've had where I asked that question, I felt like I was never really met with a clear answer. And I mean, with software, you basically have one of two ways to go, right, you either go IPO or you or you get sold." - Jonathan

Being transparent about. What position do we want to hold off in the market? Now, obviously, there's things that you cannot say, but if their objective is to make the company profitable, and attain that level of revenue and sales, I wouldn't have any problem but not everyone has the same vision. - Chris

As we can see from the above quotes, the lack of transparency has led to employees speculating on the true intentions of the founders. They are trying to understand why they might be keeping their cards close to the chest rather than sharing where the organization is heading with employees. However, as mentioned in Helene's quote, the organization's growth had a significant role in how the vision was developed and shared with employees. In the past, it was not only easy because everyone was working in the office but also due to the organization's size. It was easier to keep 50 employees in the loop than it currently is with over 150. In addition, the organization grew to this level in a few short years, which made it even more difficult for leaders to adapt as everything happened so quickly. Not only did the growth make it difficult to communicate the vision properly, but also to have one at all.

"Often I feel now people are telling me the organization is lacking a vision in the sense that they don't know what is next. They don't know what our next big move is. Our previous big move was to add forms and checklists. But now we don't have one [...] So for me, it's more like they have a clear mission. We want to support manufacturers, we want to improve their processes. And right now, maybe what's kind of lacking is we don't know what our big home run is." - Lorenzo

As Lorenzo expresses, it was easy to identify the next big moves in the past, but today, things seem less clear as the company enters a more mature stage of development. The organization's mission seems intact and clear, but what they are striving for in terms of product development is not. In addition to the organization's growth, sharing the vision became increasingly difficult as most people were now working fully remote. Indeed, as people did not work in a shared space and some new hires were in other countries, they could no longer rely on informal touchpoints to share their vision. To remedy this situation and resolve the negative employee feedback, the leadership team started sharing targets and long-term vision during their monthly town hall meetings.

"I would say the town hall. Like when I'm there, they always take the time to review a bit of the strategy." - Lorenzo

Overall, many interviewees emphasized the importance of leaders having a clear vision and effectively communicating it to employees. However, feedback from employee surveys revealed a lack of clarity and communication regarding the organization's vision. This led to a perception of transparency issues and raised questions about the leaders' true intentions among some employees. The rapid growth of the organization and the transition to remote work made it challenging to develop and share the vision effectively. To address these issues, the leadership team started sharing targets and long-term vision during monthly company-wide meetings.

5. Discussion

The following will provide a deeper understanding of our empirical findings through our theoretical framework. What stood out from our interviews was the fact that most of our findings were intertwined in one way or another. Our discussion will be divided into two parts. The first will explore how leaders of scaleups with a hybrid workplace face a dilemma regarding the level of flexibility they should provide to employees as too much can negatively impact their organization. Secondly, through the metaphor of raising a teenager, we will describe how the organization's growth and flexible work policy have affected leader-employer relationships and communications, which in turn affect employee sensemaking.

5.1 The Flexibility Dilemma

Our interviews revealed a central theme to which most of our empirical findings revolved around, employee flexibility. We have found that, while on the one hand, providing flexibility is seen as indispensable for employees and theorized vital for engagement (Kular et al., 2008), on the other hand, our findings suggest that too much flexibility negatively impacts the culture, which in turn, affects other engagement pillars. This is unsurprising, considering culture is directly linked to employee engagement (Williams, Dobson & Walters, 1989). As mentioned in our findings, the hybrid workplace was set in place following a survey to get a pulse on employees' wants and needs regarding the organization's workplace policy. The

results demonstrated that only 4% of employees were open to returning to the office full-time, with 76% wanting to return 2-3 times per week.

Our studied organization uses a flexible hybrid work model, allowing "employees to choose their location and working hours based on their daily priorities. For example, if they need to spend time focusing on a project, they can choose to work from home or in a coffee shop. If they want a sense of community, need to meet with their team, attend a training session or join a town hall, they can choose to go into the office" (Vidhyaa & Ravichandran, 2022, p.292). Over the last few years, the usage of flexible work practices has significantly increased (Leslie et al., 2012). This aligns with what we have uncovered through our interviews and document analysis, as employees have expressed placing flexibility and work-life balance high on their priority list—they want the freedom to go to the office whenever they want. Survey results have also demonstrated that nearly a quarter of employees would consider leaving the organization if the flexible work policy was too strict.

These flexible work practices are popular among our interviewees as they are associated with increased productivity and work-life balance. Every single one of our participants expressed positive feelings toward the hybrid workplace, but many were concerned with how the flexible work policy affects the organization. While there are many benefits of hybrid workplaces, there are also many downsides, with Oppong Peprah (2023) mentioning "less bonding; slow decision-making process; weakened collective identity; weakened corporate culture; work-life merge; dearth inter-worker interaction; loneliness; and inadequate supervision" (p.8). Our empirical findings also identified some of the downsides mentioned above in a hybrid workplace—which also happens to overlap with Kular et al.'s (2008) pillars of engagement.

The first of these negative impacts, which is in line with the above list, is organizational culture. Our interviewees state that, prior to the pandemic, the office was the catalyst of the strong culture that once was in place in the organization. Employees were working under the same roof, collaborating face-to-face, and creating bonds through informal touchpoints during lunch, coffee breaks and after-work drinks. However, this is no longer the reality. Offices now have meager attendance rates, which employees such as Marcel believe is "killing the culture." Their claims are supported by Arena, Hines, and Golden III (2023), who state that the density of networks influences how cultural behaviours cluster and spread in an

organization, especially in a hybrid context. They also mention that the extent to which cultural behaviours are transmitted depends on the work setting of employees. Failure to attend the office will result in a barrier to transmitting cultural behaviour, which weakens the culture (Arena, Hines, & Golden III, 2023)

Additionally, it is worth mentioning that while the high levels of flexibility strongly influence culture, the impact is further exacerbated by the fact that the organization is scaling quickly. Indeed, the flexible work policy was implemented during the organization's high-growth period, meaning that these two forces simultaneously contributed to the culture change. Helene explained that in the startup days, when the headcount was much lower, everyone knew each other and were very close—which is no longer the case with over 150 employees. This is in line with Strengers et al. (2022), who mention that as a scaleup expands, they undergo a culture shift as the formation of subcultures challenges the singular culture that once ran through the small, tight-knit startup team. The organizational culture changes as departments develop, grow, and bring in international employees with different backgrounds (Strengers et al., 2022).

Additionally, our empirical findings showed that working from a distance created two major opposing forces influencing the organization's culture – the dominant collective of employees working from home and employees working in the office alongside the founders and other leaders. This is substantiated by Opprong Peprah (2023), who states that working from home increases the change of the development of two different distinct cultures, which leads to "experiencing rapid feelings of loneliness, disenfranchisement and unhappiness" (p.8). The development of these feelings is seen in our empirical findings in the case of Jonathan, who felt left out and unfairly treated simply because he works remotely and could not create a connection with leaders. Others have expressed lagging behind in-office coworkers regarding organizational information, often relayed through office chatter before being officially announced in company-wide meetings.

So, since our interviewees believe that their previously strong culture was built on physical proximity, how does flexibility influence relationships exactly in a hybrid workplace? As mentioned, employees see freedom and flexibility as crucial. However, this flexibility leads to working from home rather than from the office, which is, as demonstrated above, believed to impact the organization's culture negatively. Many employees expressed working in a

solitary and isolated manner, which was evident in the case of Chris, who stated being able to work an entire week without having any contact with colleagues—besides his direct manager. Having so many isolated individuals who do not interact with each other is believed to negatively impact not only the culture but the organization as a whole. This is supported by Derndorfer et al. (2021), who mention that interaction with colleagues is very important—a lack can bring new difficulties for organizational performance and innovative capability. In addition, isolation prevents high levels of internal collaboration, deemed a key pillar of engagement (Kular et al., 2008).

Our empirical findings also demonstrated that limited interactions were particularly true for remote workers who, due to a lack of face-to-face communication, have difficulty establishing strong relationships with colleagues, describing them as friendly but impersonal and superficial. This is in line with Brunelle (2013), who refers to Napier and Ferries (1993) when discussing the challenges faced by employees and leaders in a hybrid workplace, where shared spaces and informal touchpoints are no longer available, which makes establishing and maintaining relationships more challenging. As a result, the likelihood of arising an emotional attachment is lower, which is one of the foundations of a good quality relationship (Napier & Ferries, 1993, as cited in Brunelle, 2013). In our interview with Marcel, he explained that this was especially evident during in-person company events where a certain shyness and discomfort prevailed. People discover personal things about colleagues with whom they have worked with for years, which would be shared and known in an office setting after a few short weeks.

Another challenge the hybrid workplace has on the organization is leaders' ability to create and share a vision. Many of our interviewees have expressed that having a vision is one of the most important traits they look for in a leader. However, social isolation and lack of communication about the vision and strategy results in employees feeling left in the dark. Many questions are left unanswered, such as what is our 5-year plan? What is our next big product development? As Iqbal, Khalid and Barykin (2021) state, the adoption of internalizing a mission, vision, goals and objectives, and organizational values is more challenging due to the lack of face-to-face interaction. However, it is crucial for employees to know what the organization is striving for and the steps they need to achieve these objectives. Indeed, as stated by Alshehri et al. (2017), employee engagement is more likely to occur in an organization that ensures employee alignment with the organization's vision (Alshehri et

al., 2017). Moreover, our interviewees believe that having a vision will allow them to continue their growth and go from a scaleup to a more legitimate and established organization.

This lack of sharing a vision created uncertainty and mistrust among employees—they believed there were transparency issues from the leadership team. Indeed, multiple interviewees have expressed mistrust regarding the leaders' true intentions in the long run. This is in line with Luthra (2015), referring to Kouzes and Posner (1993), who mention that trust, truth, and ethics are factors individuals find essential traits for a leader. Moreover, according to Luthra (2015), trust is a powerful weapon that can increase reliability and integrity, which gives leaders benefit in uncertain situations such as during the pandemic. To build trust, a leader must communicate his vision with individuals through the right interaction (Luthra, 2015).

Employees are not the only ones who noticed and felt the negative repercussions of the hybrid workplace—the leadership team has as well. To address this, leaders decided to incentivize employees to return to the office to strengthen the culture. They initiated an office makeover and offered many perks such as free coffee, snacks, and occasional meals. Even though this is provided by the organization and seen as positive by employees, this did not increase the number of employees showing up to the office. The majority of the organization enjoys working from home in their silo because it is comfortable to stay in their bubble without distractions. Moreover, they can schedule their work day however they please and decide how and where they want to work. This collective perspective and behaviour overpower leaders' desire to come to the office. This is in line with Alvesson, Blom and Sveningsson (2017), who claim that because culture influences how people feel, think, and act, it can undermine leadership because people choose to follow the consensus rather than the initiatives of their superiors.

However, something we considered interesting in our findings is that leaders themselves do not always show up in the office. Our empirical findings support this through the case of Marcel, who believes that if leaders were more present, it would encourage employees to return to the office. This is in line with Arena, Hines, and Golden III (2023), who explain that the best way to create contagious behaviour in the pursuit of culture change is by leveraging trusted individuals with a high degree of influence who are central in the organization. Doing so will

help model desired behaviours and overcome any initial resistance by other organizational members (Arena, Hines, & Golden III (2023)). Because resistance is not uncommon when leaders impose a change, their actions must reflect the cultural values and norms of the employees who are impacted by the change endeavour (Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson (2017)). Thus, again in line with Alvesson, Blom and Sveningsson (2017), leaders need to negotiate rather than impose a change, which, in the case of our studied organization, is feared to lead to employee turnover. Leaders must therefore ensure alignment through collective sensemaking and communication, as deviating views between organizational members can create confusion, dissatisfaction, and conflicts (Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017).

So, now it is time to thread the needle, bring all this together and dive into the flexibility dilemma. During the pandemic, the organization implemented a flexible work policy after conducting an employee survey indicating their desire for a hybrid workplace. As a result, employees now had complete freedom, without any restrictions, to choose their working hours and location based on their daily priorities—the organization even started to hire employees from around the world on a completely remote basis. While flexibility was desired by employees and theorized as a pillar of engagement, it brought many negative repercussions to the organization and other engagement pillars. Indeed, as indicated above, their policy led to empty offices, which, in turn, weakened the culture as employees had fewer informal touchpoints to create relationships and worked in isolated silos. Furthermore, having people spread in different locations focusing on their own objectives made it increasingly difficult for leaders to articulate and communicate a vision and strategy. However, while they have considered removing or adapting this policy, they believe doing so will push some employees to leave the organization and make them a less attractive workplace. For others, going to the office is not an option as they live in different regions of the country or even the world.

Hence, based on our empirical findings, there appears to be such a thing as too much flexibility. This brings us to the following dilemma for leaders of scaleup organizations:

Satisfy employee desires and ensure retention by providing complete flexibility, yet harm the organization and potentially limit its growth through lower performance and innovation OR restrict workplace flexibility at the risk of losing talent, yet potentially solving current organizational issues.

5.2 Raising a Teenager Is Not As Easy As It Looks

The second part of our discussion focuses on leader-employee relations and the resulting impact on communication and sensemaking. To reiterate our literature review and refresh our readers' memory, when we say sensemaking, we refer to the process by which individuals attempt to create a plausible understanding of ambiguous, equivocal or confusing problems or situations (Colville, Ian & Brown, 2012; Weick, 1995). Our empirical findings suggest that, in a scaleup organization with a hybrid workplace, the strength of an employee's relationship with founders and other leaders is related to not only their work setting but also the length of tenure. Employees who have worked in the organization since its early startup days and have had much face-to-face time with leaders have a higher sensemaking ability—particularly concerning communications. They can better contextualize messages and reduce uncertainty and confusion by better understanding leaders' tendencies. Furthermore, we also found that the hybrid workplace, where people work from various locations worldwide, has created language barriers and pushed leaders to increase their reliance on virtual communication channels. These two elements also affect employee sensemaking of leader communications.

Firstly, as mentioned in the above paragraph, our empirical findings imply a connection between the length of tenure of employees and the strength of their bond with founders and other leaders. In a scaleup organization, leaders are closer to employees who have been there since the startup days. This aligns with Hull (2016), who mentions that in startup organizations, employees can create personal bonds with founders by collaborating on projects and sitting in on the same meetings. However, as Lorenzo shared, with the organization's growth, founders do not have the same familiarity level with employees as they once had. Our findings are once again supported by Hull (2016), who discusses how leader-employee relationships are commonly less tangible or nonexistent as an organization

scales. Having 50 employees working closely together and bonding at the office during lunch is different than being over 150 people spread across the province, country or even globe—which brings us to our second relational discussion point, hybrid work setting.

Indeed, individuals who work away from the office have a more challenging time establishing personal bonds with the leadership team. A lack of face-to-face interactions and informal touchpoints makes it difficult for employees to establish strong relationships with leaders. However, it is worth noting that this is only the case for employees who were hired on a remote basis and remained far from leaders. This is in line with Schreier, Udomkit & Matt (2022), who state that in a context where trust between employees and leaders has not yet been established, working away from the office can hinder the development of new relationships. However they also mention that this does not apply to workers who have had the chance to establish in-person connections with leaders before becoming remote workers. Our empirical findings support this through the case of Lorenzo. Lorenzo mentions that having worked at the Montreal office before the pandemic and moving abroad to Europe allowed him to create bonds with the founders, providing him with direct access to the CEO. Hence, our empirical findings have uncovered that, in a hybrid workplace, there is a considerable discrepancy in the quality of relationships between leaders and employees. Employees working from the office have a considerable advantage over remote workers—unless they worked in the office with leaders prior to settling away from the office. We can understand that the chosen work setting of employees is an important factor to consider, which is in accordance with Varma et al. (2022), who argue that, in a hybrid workplace, the location itself is a moderating component in how frequently they interact with leaders and the quality of the relationship they establish with them.

Now that we have gone through which elements of hybrid scaleup organization influence the relationships with leaders, how does it affect employees? Our empirical findings suggest that relationships affect employees' sensemaking of communications with leaders. According to Weick, Sutcliffe and Obstfeld (2005), sensemaking is rooted in language, talk and communication—situations, organizations and environments are talked into existence. Furthermore, Neufeld, Wan and Fang (2008) mention, "As organizations and employees become increasingly dispersed, communication becomes the principal means by which individuals exercise leadership," (p.228) making it unsurprising that communication is a central theme in our empirical findings. Indeed, as shared by Lorenzo, an incident occurred

when a message sent by the CEO via Slack created a disturbance in the organization. He further explained that, while he understood where the CEO was coming from with his message because he knew him personally, this was not the case for everyone. The lack of relationship between the leaders and employees led to the misinterpretation of the message and, consequently, individuals being negatively affected by it. As mentioned by Ancona (2012), when leaders communicate to the organization, there can be a gap between how a message is intended and interpreted. However, for an employee such as Lorenzo, who has a strong and established relationship with the CEO, the message did not bother him and was understood as intended. This aligns with Kelley and Kelloway (2012), who suggest that in the presence of a solid personal relationship, there is a shared common understanding which requires less clarification in communications.

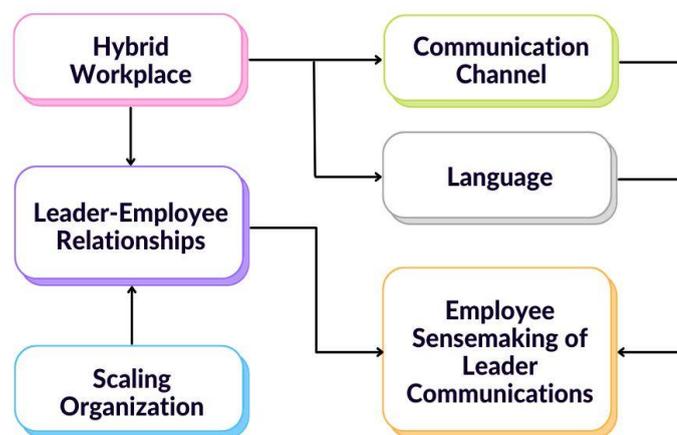
Our empirical findings also identified that a hybrid workplace directly impacts employee sensemaking—not only through relationships. Indeed, in a hybrid workplace, most communications are done through virtual channels that provide lower levels of media richness. As Palmer, Dufour and Akin (2017) state, face-to-face communication offers the highest richness as it provides “the ability to handle many items of information at the same time, the availability of rapid feedback, and the ability to establish a personal focus” (p.232). Messages become more difficult to interpret when moving down the richness hierarchy and employing channels such as Slack. Indeed, information such as non-verbal cues and tone of voice are lost. The immediate feedback and personal focus can also be hindered depending on whether it is a direct message or a communication on a company-wide Slack channel. This means there is more room for ambiguity and confusion, which impacts employees’ sensemaking ability. A perfect example of this was provided by Rosalie, who explains that she sometimes receives messages that appear aggressive from the leadership team. However, in reality, they are not meant to be—the sender is smiling and in a good mood when sending it. The scenario described by Rosalie falls in line with Kelley and Kelloway (2012), who mentioned that online messages are perceived as colder and more negative than ones communicated face-to-face.

Language was another challenge that stood out in our empirical findings affecting employee sensemaking in a hybrid workplace. Indeed, as mentioned in our findings, French is the dominant language in the organization. While leaders and founders do their best to speak in English as much as possible, this is not always the case. Furthermore, as English is not their

first language, this means they do not express themselves as comfortably and eloquently. This sometimes leads to meaning being diluted through leaders not properly expressing themselves or the employee translating the message. This aligns with Kuznetsov and Kuznetsova (2014), who argue that translating terms can create a mismatch in vocabulary richness and can be a source of confusion and distortion to the extent that it distorts reality.

On the right, we have created a visual representation of what we have discussed so far in this chapter of our findings. As we have demonstrated, employees' work context and tenure affect relationships, which, in turn, influence communication sensemaking. Additionally, we have shown that having a hybrid workplace can also influence

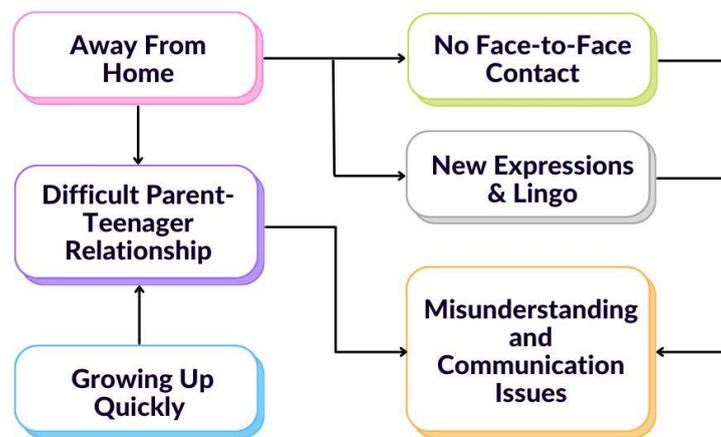
Organizational Elements Affecting Employee Sensemaking of Leader Communication in Scaleups With a Hybrid Workplace



employee sensemaking through the communication channels and languages used to operate. Indeed, having employees dispersed across various locations gives greater importance to online mediums with lower media richness. Leaders do not have the option of selecting which channel is appropriate for specific communications. In many cases, they are restricted to virtual channels—leading to a higher chance of misinterpretation from employees. Lastly, as the companies' members are increasingly cross-national or even international, the language used in internal communication impacts employee sensemaking as not everyone now has the same mother tongue.

We believe this discussion point can be better understood through **the metaphor of parents raising a teenager**. This metaphor is fitting as entrepreneurs and organizational founders often refer to their venture as "their baby" (Kaehr Serra & Brozillo, 2013). On the right, we recreated the same visual model but changed the words to illustrate our metaphor clearly.

Difficulties of Raising a Teenager



Like a scaleup, teenagers are becoming more mature but are highly unstable as they grow quickly. They prefer hanging out with friends and independently doing their own thing away from home. These two factors directly impact the quality of a parent's relationship with their child, and with a damaged relationship comes communication issues and misunderstandings. Furthermore, as mentioned, since the teenager is rarely at home, this forces parents to communicate with them via different online channels on their cell phones. Teenagers also develop unique lingo and expressions that differ from their parents. Hence, a hindered relationship, reliance on virtual communications and developing a unique language can all lead to many communication issues and misunderstandings.

Overall, it is pointless for parents to stick to the past and treat their teenager like a child—they are changing, as are their needs. Parents need to adapt to the new reality and move forwards. Like parents, organizational leaders must also look forward and realize that how they have led the organization thus far may not work anymore. The organization is changing, and so should they. This aligns with Hull (2016), who explains that leadership approaches and strategies that worked well in the startup days may not be effective anymore. The organization is quickly growing, and leaders must adapt to the new reality and context. Additionally, the organization did not have a hybrid workplace in the startup days, supporting the need to adapt. Not only is the organization larger, but there is also less face-to-face time with employees, and as mentioned by Kelley and Kelloway (2012), leaders cannot lead virtually the same way as in a face-to-face context.

6. Conclusion

Throughout this study, we have sought to understand how employees' sensemaking and engagement are affected by the approach of founders and senior leaders to leading a scaleup with a hybrid workplace. Our interviews were conducted virtually, as our participants were spread across the world, allowing us to gather diverse perspectives on this critical topic. This concluding chapter will summarize our empirical findings and discuss how they contribute to existing theory. We will also explore practical implications that can be drawn from our research and identify limitations that suggest possible directions for future research.

6.1 Empirical Findings

6.1.1 Communication

Our communication findings unveiled various barriers for employees, both context-specific and universal. Leaders' inadequate communication, inconsistency, or failure to address issues can generate uncertainty and friction among employees. Additionally, the organization's growth has weakened personal relationships between leaders and employees, resulting in more frequent message misinterpretations. Slack serves as the primary communication platform, but the high message volume poses challenges for employees in tracking and prioritizing messages. Remote workers in different timezones encounter further complexities, including the need for strategic timing to avoid messages being overlooked. Due to limited overlapping working hours, time zones also hinder collaboration opportunities with colleagues and leaders. Lastly, language barriers arise for employees outside Quebec, as French is the predominant language, leading to challenges such as misinterpretation, loss of meaning in translation, and potential career limitations.

6.1.2 Leader-Employee Relationships

Overall, our interviews have shined a light on critical relational challenges that come with leading a scaleup organization with a hybrid workplace. These hurdles stem primarily from two sources: the organization's growth and the remote work context of employees. When it comes to growth, the sheer increase in personnel makes it difficult for leaders to establish a personal relationship with every member of the team. Additionally, in a scaleup, leaders do not interact daily with employees as in the startup phase meaning new employees have less opportunity to interact with leaders and establish strong bonds. This leads to tenured

employees having an advantage over newer hires as they had a chance to establish these connections, which, in this case, appears to have created an inner circle at the top. Lastly, regarding the work context, being physically away from the leadership teams and not having face-to-face time with them complicates forming relationships. This challenge is further exacerbated when the distance is also intertwined with timezone barriers, limiting the workday overlap between leaders and their teams and leading to dissatisfaction.

6.1.3 Employee Engagement

During interviews with employees, it was found that social interaction and relationships among colleagues play a significant role in engagement. Employees who work from the office have more opportunities to establish personal bonds with their colleagues, while remote workers find it more challenging. This can affect the level of collaboration among employees, as those who work away from the office may feel isolated. Leaders can organize events to unite employees, but the unfamiliarity between colleagues can still be felt. Time differences between employees working in different time zones can also affect collaboration, as finding overlapping hours to work together can be challenging. Lastly, employees perceive limited professional advancement opportunities, especially relating to vertical growth. While they recognize that this challenge is inherent in working for a scaleup, they have expressed dissatisfaction regarding the absence of clear pathways.

6.1.4 Organizational Culture, Vision & Strategy

When it comes to culture, in a scaleup, founders are the ones who dictate it, as organizational values often mirror their personal beliefs. However, as the organization grows, so will the culture and with a hybrid workplace, leaders can no longer rely on simply having a great office to foster it. As for having a vision, this is seen by employees as a critical trait for leaders. They want a goal to strive for and something to believe in—making it vital to communicate it to them appropriately. If this is not done correctly, it leads to skepticism about the transparency of leaders and creates speculations regarding their true intentions for the organization. The company is growing—leaders cannot leverage the strategies they previously used to ensure everyone strives towards the same objectives.

6.2 Theoretical Contribution

As explained in our background and problem statement, scaleups play an important role in the economy of developed countries through job creation and innovation (Strengers et al., 2022). However, while their value is understood, little is known about the factors contributing to their high performance levels (OECD, 2021). Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic and technological advancements have produced fertile grounds for the accelerated creation of hybrid workplaces—a practice that was mainly unheard of in the past (Oppong Peprah, 2023). As a result, hybrid workplaces represent the future of work (Oppong Peprah, 2023). Hence, the theoretical gap that brought our research to life is the lack of knowledge regarding the specific implications and challenges of leading a scaleup with a hybrid workplace model. While there is growing interest in studying both scaleups and hybrid workplaces individually, there is limited research on how these factors intersect and influence each other in terms of leadership—especially through the perception of employees. Our study has provided a stepping stone to future research exploring the novel situation startups with hybrid workplaces find themselves.

Firstly, we uncovered how culture and engagement in scaleups could be negatively affected by the high levels of flexibility provided by the hybrid workplace model. Our empirical findings suggest that leaders of scaleup organizations face a dilemma. On the one hand, providing much flexibility, seen as the core of a hybrid workplace, is essential for employees and is considered crucial for engagement (Kular et al., 2008). On the other hand, this flexibility negatively influences the culture, which in turn, affects other engagement pillars, which is unsurprising considering current literature strongly connects culture and employee engagement (Williams, Dobson & Walters, 1989). This is a valuable insight as current literature states that culture and engagement strongly influence organizational performance (Pointon; 2017, Robinson, Perryman & Hayday, 2004; Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017). Hence, as scaleups, by definition, are high-performance organizations with rapid growth, it is vital to ensure that flexibility does not harm these factors (Strengers et al., 2022).

Furthermore, our second contribution is the metaphor of parents raising a teenager. This metaphor provides a vivid illustration of the challenges leaders face in a scaleup organization with a hybrid workplace. By drawing parallels between the changing dynamics in parent-teenager relationships and the evolving relationships between leaders and employees,

the study offers a relatable framework for understanding the need for adaptation. This metaphorical perspective adds a unique and practical dimension to the existing literature on leadership in scaleups. Indeed, our study supports Hull's (2016) findings which mention that in scaleup organizations, leader-employee relationships become less tangible or nonexistent as an organization scales by adding the dimension of hybrid workplaces—which create a similar effect. By understanding how these two forces come into play, we were able to get a deeper understanding of how this may affect employee sensemaking as it relates to communication—a core concept of our findings.

6.3 Practical Implications

In scaleup organizations, things change quickly, which means that leaders must be proactive and adapt their approach to leading employees in parallel to growth (Hull, 2016). Leaders cannot simply use the same strategies as during the startup days—no matter how successful they were (Hull, 2016). Furthermore, startups are not immune to the transition towards hybrid work, which is set to become a dominant model for years to come (Oppong Peprah, 2023). This shift also means that leaders need to reimagine their role, as one cannot lead employees the same way as in an office setting (Odom et al., 2022). Hence, we can understand that, for scaleups adopting a hybrid workplace, the need for change and adaptability is high as they need to juggle two forces simultaneously. With that being said, as we studied how employees are affected and perceive leadership, our findings can provide applicable guidelines to better understand the repercussions of leaders' actions and decisions.

So, based on our findings, what are the areas we have found where leaders need to focus on and adapt? Firstly, communication, communication, communication. We cannot emphasize enough how important this topic has been throughout our research. Communication channels play a vital role here. Indeed, in hybrid workplaces, instant messaging platforms such as Slack are dominant as people do not share physical spaces. However, their lower richness can easily lead to misinterpretation, as not every employee has a level of familiarity with leaders—which is inevitable as the company grows. The leadership team needs to choose its words carefully and even take a moment to reflect on whether or not this is a suitable medium to use.

Reflecting on the medium itself is critical. Using instant messaging platforms also creates issues with the sheer volume of messages. It is easy for employees to miss a message or even simply misjudge its importance and not consider it. Critical information should be shared through as many channels as possible to ensure employees are aware. Leaders can address them in company-wide meetings and instruct middle management to transmit the messages to their team and announce it in the company chat. The last point about communication is language. Language plays a critical role as the company expands and brings in more people from different areas of the world. Leaders must ensure they stick to a single universal language, even in informal conversation, to minimize the possibility of employees feeling left out and improper sensemaking.

Lastly, our findings show that the office has meagre attendance rates due to the organization's flexible work policy. Leaders saw how creating a hybrid workplace unfolded in practice and its adverse effects on culture, amplified by rapid growth. While it will not bring the culture back to what it was before (Strengers et al., 2022), if leaders want to have employees in the office once again to rekindle the culture, they will need to lead by example—which is the best way to create contagious behaviour (Arena, Hines & Golden III, 2023) . Leveraging trusted individuals with a high degree of influence who are central in the organization, such as a leader, other people will follow, eventually strengthening the culture in our studied organization (Arena, Hines & Golden III, 2023).

By considering these practical implications, leaders can address the identified communication, culture and growth challenges to foster a more engaged and aligned workforce in a growing organization with a hybrid workplace.

6.4 Limitations

Our first limitation relates to the fact that there are many types of hybrid workplaces, and given that our research was based on a single case study, we only analyzed one of them—the flexible hybrid work model. However, as stated by Vidhyaa & Ravichandran (2022), there are three other types: fixed hybrid work model, office-first hybrid work model and remote-first. Hence, some of our findings and discussion may not apply to the other models.

The penultimate limitation is the sample size of our study. While we did have a fairly even split between remote and office workers as well as gender, the same cannot be said about roles. Indeed, we attempted to have a sample as diversified as possible regarding roles and departments—however, despite our best efforts, some divisions were left uncovered. Hence, not all opinions and points of view were taken into consideration. This also means that opinions were blended without considering individuals' roles and teams, meaning that we could not compare, contrast and nuance our findings.

Our final limitation is related to our chosen scope of leadership. Our study aligns with Alvesson, Blom and Sveningsson (2017), who shift the concept of leadership from middle managers to founders and other senior leaders. However, our interviews revealed that many workers in a hybrid workplace are far from senior leaders and have little to no interactions with them. This results in many employees referring to their direct managers when discussing leadership—not senior leaders.

6.5 Future Research

Regarding our limitation relating to the type of hybrid work model, we believe it would be interesting to conduct a comparison study between four different scaleups, each using a different system. Doing so would allow a more complete understanding of which model is better-suited for scaleup organization and offer possible solutions for the negative impacts of each one.

Furthermore, as discussed, we were limited by our sample size. Using a larger sample with many individuals from each department would not only allow us to gain deeper insights but also to understand the different perspectives. Indeed, it would be interesting to study whether there are different employee perceptions depending on the individuals' profession and departmental sub-cultures.

Lastly, as mentioned, it was difficult for many interviewees to discuss senior leaders due to a lack of knowledge. Therefore, as most of what they shared was related to their direct manager, which they viewed as a leader, it would be interesting to understand their implications in the daily lives of employees. Indeed, many workers, especially remote ones,

have minimal contact with organizational members—besides their direct managers. Hence, this points to the fact that middle managers have a significant impact on employees.

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- (No date) 'What is Zoom Video Conferencing?' Zoom support.

8. Appendix

8.1 Appendix - Interview Guide

Warm-up - Introduce ourselves and the purpose of our study.

1. Can you tell us a little bit about yourself and your professional background?
2. Could you tell us about your background at Poka and the role you currently occupy?
3. How would you describe a typical day and/or week at work?

Questions related to leadership, culture and the organization:

1. How would you describe your organization?
2. How would you describe the leadership in the organization?
3. Do you have any constructive feedback for the leadership approach in the organization?
4. In your opinion, how involved do you think leaders are in day-to-day activities?
5. How important do you believe task and project accomplishment is for leaders?
6. What would be your ideal leader, what traits are you looking for?
7. How would you describe the organization's vision and strategy?

Questions related communication, engagement and voice:

1. Do you feel that your voice is heard at a departmental level?
2. Do you feel that your voice is heard at an organizational level?
3. How would you describe internal communications channels in the organization?
4. How would you characterize your relationship with your coworkers?
5. Do you believe you have opportunities for individual career growth and development?
6. Do you feel that leaders prioritized your working conditions and well-being?

Last chance to provide input:

1. Do you want to add something else to your answers?

8.2 Appendix - Interviewees

Name	Work context
Leonique	Remote
Anne-Floor	Remote
Peter	Remote
Maura	Office
Rosalie	Office
Jonathan	Remote
Chris	Office
Samuel	Remote
Lorenzo	Remote
Marcel	Office
Helene	Office
Rosie	Office
Kim	Remote