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Employee Identity in Contemporary Organizations

What factors affect identification of onsite and remote employees in contemporary organizations on an individual, organizational, and group level?

by

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Abstract

Title	Employee Identity in Contemporary Organizations <i>What factors affect identification of onsite and remote employees in contemporary organizations on an individual, organizational, and group level?</i>
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Supervisor	Stefan Sveningsson, Professor of Business Administration Lund University School of Economics and Management, Sweden
Date	17 th of May 2024
Purpose	The purpose of this study is to understand different employee identities in a contemporary organization that recently developed a diverse, partially remote workforce. This includes researching the differences between onsite and remote employees, and what the employee identities tell us on an individual, group, and organizational level.
Methodology	This research is based on a company that primarily operates in the field of 3D production and advertisement. Following an abductive approach, and hence focusing on a qualitative research method, this study uses the Symbolic Interactionist Tradition. Fourteen semi-structured interviews are conducted.
Theoretical Framework	Three main topics are studied from a functionalistic, interpretative and critical oriented study. The topics analyzed are identity theory, organizational identity, and organizational change and identity in contemporary organizations.
Contributions	This thesis is contributing to identity theory, researching employee identity on different levels to better focus culture and employee engagement planning on the diverse needs of onsite and remote employees. This study compares the identity of onsite versus remote employees within a contemporary, growing company.
Keywords	Employee Identity, Identity Theory, Contemporary Organizations, Organizational Identity, Organizational Growth, Remote Working

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Emma Bruins and Hanne Schoenemann

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Since the pandemic was declared by the World Health Organization in March 2020, the switch to remote working had become mandatory for many organizations to prevent COVID-19 from spreading (McPhail et al., 2023). The tech industry in particular has shown its interdependence with other aspects of society, making it relatively easy for those working for tech companies to switch to fully working remotely (Russell & Frachtenberg, 2023). Not only in-person working, but also in-person hiring processes had to be adjusted according to the pandemic regulations (Jewkes et al., 2020). This means that companies started to adapt to remote interviews and remote hiring, resulting in a larger pool of applicants who could work from anywhere in the world (Jewkes et al., 2020).

This remote working model has increasingly become the norm for numerous industries, but also caused some employees to feel isolated as in-person contact and social activities in the offices disappeared (Bülbül, 2022). Hence, when the pandemic started to stabilize in 2021, some organizations introduced a hybrid working model, with the intention of keeping the home-office balance.

This trend can also be observed at Azure B.V. (henceforth: Azure), a creative tech company founded in a European country in 1999, with two main offices in Europe. Apart from onsite employees, ±55% of its employees work remotely, from 30+ different countries on five different continents (Bruins, 2024). The number of remote employees at Azure has been growing since the pandemic started in 2020, from ±70 employees in 2020, to ±300 employees in 2024. The growth of the company, in addition to the increasing number of remote employees and team compositions of remote and onsite employees, has had a significant impact on its company culture.

1.2 Research Objectives

1.2.1 Purpose

Redefining company culture is not an uncommon practice for companies that have experienced changes due to a distributed workforce (Raghuram, 2021). Due to international growth, Azure finds itself in a similar position (Bruins, 2024). Closely related to company culture is employee involvement, commitment, and identity (Nongo & Ikyanyon, 2012). According to Ashforth and Mael (1989, p.1), “social identification is a perception of oneness with a group of persons”. While research has been conducted relating employee identity with organizational change (Agostino, 2004), and employee identity with organizational values (Johnson & Jackson, 2009), research on employee identity of onsite employees versus remote employees within one company is yet to be conducted. Given the rapid growth and division of onsite and remote employees, in addition to the companies’ objective to define its’ company culture and work on a new leadership program, this study is relevant for contemporary, globally expanding companies. By gaining more knowledge on the employee identity of onsite and remote employees, Azure will be able to better focus their culture and employee engagement planning on the onsite and remote employees’ needs, which will eventually lead to more success for their culture and employee engagement plans.

1.2.2 Research Problem

Understanding and nurturing employee identity is essential for personal satisfaction in employment and integration into the organizational culture while remaining autonomous (Fenwick, 2010; Driver, 2017). Moreover, literature shows that ethical management that aligns with the company culture enhances employees' sense of belonging and connection to the organization, shaping employee identity. If the workforce of a company is split between onsite and remote employees, it may be difficult to know how different groups of employees identify, and hence feel like they belong, within the company.

In general, it is important to analyze employee identity with regards to a person's employer due to the significance that work holds for individuals (Judge et al., 2020). This is due to the amount of time spent by the adult population in their working context, therefore forming identity. Yet, it is crucial to note that identity theory is complex (Ybema et al., 2009), claiming that an individual has a diverse set of identities, for a diverse set of social contexts (Stryker, 1968).

For this research, these diverse social contexts can be seen in working location and environment that the employees work in. Having different sets of identities for diverse social contexts results in identities frequently being interconnected or opposed during inner conflicts, arising from contradictions within oneself (Stryker, 1968). While identity and culture are separate concepts, they are nonetheless intertwined, due to the questions regarding one's sense of the self, the 'I am' within identity, can be explained by cultural elements (Setyaningsih & Nawangsari, 2021). The concept of 'I am' is interesting to analyze within this research to find a potential difference in identifying with a contemporary organization when working remote or onsite. While research has linked employee identity with organizational change (Agostino, 2004) and organizational values (Johnson & Jackson, 2009), there is currently no research comparing the identity of onsite versus remote employees within a single company. This means there is a gap that can be closed by connecting existing literature to research on remote and onsite employees at Azure.

1.2.3 Research Question

Since we chose to do an abductive study, the central question to guide this thesis' empirical research was refined throughout the process. The research question serves to provide direction, purpose, and clarity to the study. Based on the research problem and aligned with the study's objectives, the following research question will be answered.

What factors affect identification of onsite and remote employees in contemporary organizations on an individual, organizational, and group level?

1.3 Disposition

This thesis consists of six chapters. In chapter 1, the *introduction*, we provide the readers with an overview of the research topic, context, significance, and objectives, setting the stage for the rest of the thesis by presenting the research problem. Within chapter 2, the *literature review* is conducted to acquire insight into the current and previous research and discussions of subjects specific to this research's topic. The *methodology* forms the third chapter, describing the chosen research methods, showcasing the validity and reliability of the research, including ethical considerations. In chapter 4 the *findings* are presented, using a narrative style to guide the reader through the results of the interviews conducted. The *discussion* is placed in the fifth chapter for the interpretation of the results, by comparing the findings with existing literature. This leads to chapter 6, the *conclusion*, to summarize the key findings, and reflect on the significance of the research by revisiting the research objectives.

2. Literature Review

The theory within the literature review is structured to align different ways to understand the concept 'identity'. There are three different areas of knowledge interests, known as 'Functionalistic Oriented Studies', 'Interpretative Oriented Studies', and 'Critical Oriented Studies (Sveningsson & Sörgärde, 2023). These studies will be applied on the criteria of identity in contemporary organizations.

Functionalistic oriented studies talk about what function identity has in a specific context (Sveningsson & Sörgärde, 2023). It can be seen as the 'tool-based perspective', with the aim to provide technical basis in form of classical and rational studies. These studies focus on what tools, models and frameworks are useful in the specific context of the respective research. In the context of identity studies, they often refer to identities being social, whereby the individual overlaps with the social context, a group, or an organization. Most literature on identity is functional, with a technical focus on procedures. Within this section the guiding question is 'How do we see identity in contemporary organizations?'

Interpretative oriented studies concentrate on understanding. Interpretative knowledge, often called 'hermeneutics,' focuses on understanding through language, meaning, and culture. It aims to provide broad insights rather than specific techniques, helping to clarify complex aspects of the world and improve comprehension (Sveningsson & Sörgärde, 2023). They are taking another departure in grasping identity, taking individuals separately, focusing on how individuals understand themselves. Once one starts recognizing the individual and how people make sense of themselves, their surroundings and their situation, the individual is analyzed from an interpretative stance. The question asked throughout is "Who am I and – by implication – how should I act?" (Cerulo, 1997; Howard, 2000; cited in Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2010), whereby the answer to that question can be varied, since diverse factors influence individuals. Thus, interpretative studies analyze how people understand and talk about themselves, on the criteria of 'What kind of identities are there in contemporary organizations?'

Critical oriented studies take power perspective into consideration on social matters that discipline an individual, and where an individual feels subordinate to. It focuses on critical reflection to break free from cognitive barriers and assumptions in individuals' thinking and established knowledge, revealing the darker side of organizations and acknowledging conflicts

of interest (Sveningsson & Sörgärde, 2023). These studies take a more critical stance, putting more emphasis on language, and on how different types of concepts and knowledge can discipline individuals. Hereby an individual has no power over the social norms (e.g. language). Therefore, critical literature challenges and might sabotage identity construction (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2010), and therefore the guiding question is ‘*Why* is identity impacted in contemporary organizations?’.

Within the literature review, we take on the three different stances on understanding identity, aiming to create a comprehensive review and analysis of the concept. To be able to compare all studies on the same grounds, the topics of ‘Identity Theory’, ‘Organizational Identity’, and ‘Organizational Change and Identity’ will be analyzed from all three perspectives. Yet, it should be noted that we are aware of the difficulties to differentiate the studies within the different stances of the framework. The aim is to ensure that sense-making and qualitative studies are mostly presented within interpretative studies. The following figure pictures the studies of the theoretical framework used within the literature.

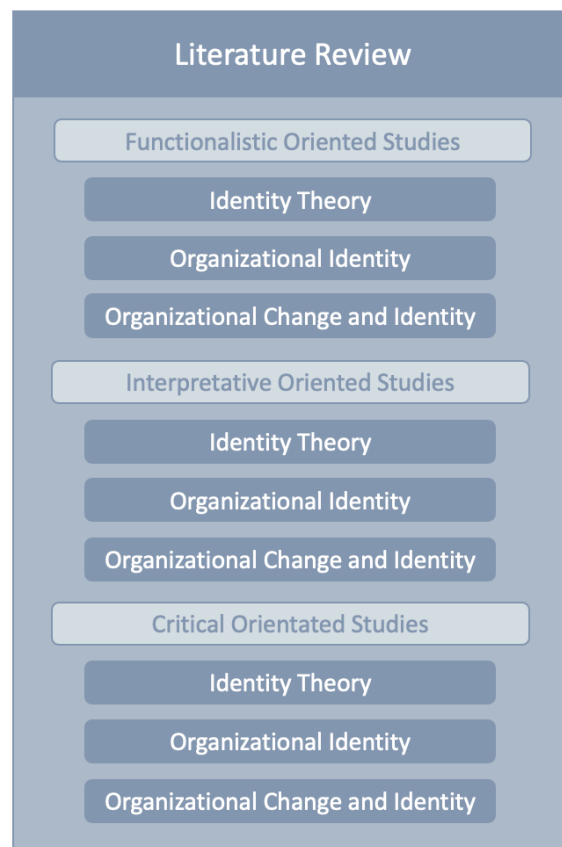


Fig. 1: Structure of Literature Review

2.1 Functionalistic Oriented Studies

‘How do we see identity in contemporary organizations?’

2.1.1 Identity Theory

With employees as the guiding topic of this research, it is crucial to delve into the framework of ‘identity theory’, formulated by Stryker and Burke (2000). Looking at ‘identity’ by itself, it is defined as “a set of meanings attached to roles individuals occupy in the social structure” (Stryker, 1980, 2002; cited in Stets & Serpe, 2013, p.34), whereby ‘meanings’ emerge from individuals' reflections on themselves within various roles, social contexts, or personal identities (Burke & Stets, 2009; cited in Stets & Serpe, 2013). Identity theory originates from the ideas by George Herbert Mead, particularly in his work from 1934, providing a foundational framework for examining various sociological and social psychological matters (Stryker & Burke, 2000). Within Mead’s framework, identity theory aims to define the concepts of "society" and "self", with the goal to structure them as explanations for behaviors that could be studied through research. Further interesting to note is that Mead’s described ‘self’ is complex, composed of interconnected and autonomous components that both support and sometimes contradict each other. Identity theory embraces James' (1890, cited in Stryker & Burke, 2000, p.286) idea that individuals have multiple selves corresponding to the various social groups they engage with. The work of identity theory, with this name, first appeared in the 60s (Stryker & Burke, 2000). Identity theory has been formulated by Stryker and Burke and is a sociological concept that establishes connections between an individual's self-perception, known as identities, and their interactions within role-based relationships and corresponding behaviors (Stryker & Burke, 2000; Desrochers, 2004).

It is important to differentiate identity theory from a similar framework that can be analyzed in conformance with employee identity, being the ‘social identity theory’. This differentiation was made by Tajfel and Turner (1986, cited in Brown, 2000), pinpointing a distinction between interpersonal contexts where behavior is primarily guided by personal characteristics, and group settings where behavior is predominantly shaped by categorical processes. The second, describing social identity theory, was established in the 1970s (Hogg, 2016), categorizing individuals into different social groups based on factors including age, gender, and religion

(Ashforth & Mael, 1989). It explains the significance of one's self-concept, related cognitive processes, and social views and assumptions in interpersonal relationships and group dynamics (Hogg, 2016). Social identity theory highlights the dynamics within groups and interactions between different groups, rather than focusing solely on individual role behaviors (Desrochers, 2004). The theory also suggests that people aim to develop or preserve a positive social identity, which in turn raises their self-esteem (Brown, 2000). If an identity is not fulfilling, individuals might break away from their group or look for alternative ways to make their group stand out in a good way. More in depth, a variety of sub-theories emphasize and concentrate on “social influence and group norms, leadership within and between groups, self-enhancement and uncertainty reduction motivations, deindividuation and collective behavior, social mobilization and protest, and marginalization and deviance within groups” (Hogg, 2016). Hence, it is assumed, that the above-described group dynamics can offer their members a sense of identity (Hogg et al., 1995, cited in Desrochers, 2004, p. 61).

2.1.2 Organizational Identity

An organization's identity is formed by the people in it and the culture that they are part of and have created (Setyaningsih & Nawangsari, 2021). Therefore, to further delve into organizational identity, one must understand the concept of organizational culture first. Defining the term *organizational culture* can be challenging, since the meaning, methodologies and perspectives on ‘culture’ are not globally established and conformable (Palmer & Hardy, 2000). According to Alvesson (2011), an attempt to define ‘company culture’ is described as “an umbrella concept for a way of thinking that takes a serious interest in cultural and symbolic phenomena or aspects in organizations”. It is not uncommon for companies to change or improve the company culture as an attempt to simultaneously improve their employees’ engagement and thus satisfaction (Afkar & Sayekti, 2020), as organizational culture is proven to have a significant and positive influence on overall job satisfaction (Setyaningsih & Nawangsari, 2021). Satisfied and engaged employees have a higher motivation to work for the company, resulting in increased efficiency and company loyalty (Matzler & Renzl, 2006).

The concept of identity is distinct from the concept of culture, yet there is a connection. The questions around the ‘I am’ within identity can be explained through cultural material (Setyaningsih & Nawangsari, 2021). Where organizational culture has an impact on its employees, *organizational identity* tends to work the other way around: the identity of an organization is formed by the needs, preferences and identities of its employees (Zinkstein,

2018). The concept of organizational identity represents the essence, or ‘central core’, of an organization, encompassing its mission statement, values, ideology, and competencies (Albert & Whetten, 1985).

The onion metaphor as explained by Whetten and Godfrey (1998), describes that the ‘core’ of the organization is depicted by progressively peeling away the outer layers of the organization, until only the most important part of the organization, its organizational identity, remains. Organizational identity is the employees’ identification and affiliation with their company, considering the definition by Christensen et al. (2008) as “organizational identification refers to situations where people define themselves in terms of an organization, including its products, its missions and its values”. A company mission statement is generally seen as crucial in helping a company form its identity, purpose, and direction, according to Leuthesser and Kohli (1997). They also state that a mission statement is often “polymorphic in nature: one idea, many implementations.” (Leuthesser & Kohli, 1997, p. 63). This implies that the meaning of a mission statement is dependent on the reader, their values, and their identity. Other research shows that it is not only important for employees to share their sense making regarding the company mission, but management’s involvement in clarifying the company’s mission statement is the most influential factor when it comes to value compatibility between employees and the company (Toh et al., 2022). The same research states that management can influence value compatibility by adapting the mission statement’s contents, which will eventually lead to improved levels of employee satisfaction and performance. As this level of satisfaction and, ultimately, employee retention is generally improved by a common goal amongst employees and it is therefore important for companies to formulate a company-wide mission statement that describes this common goal (Cloutier et al., 2015).

Delving further into satisfaction factors for employees, Locke examines main job factors in satisfaction being work, pay, promotions, benefits and policies, peers and colleagues, supervisors, and top leadership (Locke, 1976). ‘Work’ motivators are the devotion to the personal job tasks, but also devotion to achievements with the aim to accomplish excellence. Also, it entails that work should include mental challenges, with personal development and growth opportunities, counteracting boredom, but finding the fine line not to reach overworking and exhaustion. The second motivator is ‘pay’, which should be high enough, considering procedural and distributive justice. Hand in hand with this comes ‘promotions’ and ‘benefits’ as a personal satisfaction factor, triggering ambition, whereby equal chances for

development should be considered in an organization. These equal opportunities should also be reflected in a healthy and safe working environment to enhance motivation and satisfaction. The people aspect is also a crucial job factor in reaching satisfaction. Colleagues and supervisors should be respectful, trustworthy, considerate, and supportive in order to achieve job satisfaction. Additionally, top leadership should be competent, enabling, and connecting to accomplish organizational success. (Locke, 1976; Schneider & Locke, 1971)

A suitable definition of job satisfaction by Locke (1976, cited in Zhu, 2012) is described as “a kind of pleasant or positive affection state, which grows in the process of evaluating an individual’s work experience”. Another suitable definition, additionally to Locke’s definition from 1976, McShane and Von Glinow (2010, cited in Praningrum et al., 2023) more recently defined job satisfaction “as an individual's evaluation of their work in the context of industry and organizations, consisting of assessing job characteristics, work environment, and emotional experiences at work”.

Yet, when these satisfaction factors are not met, the result is job dissatisfaction, further resulting in an individual’s disconnectedness (Henne & Locke, 1985). This ultimately leads to reactions that are not further supporting the organizations goals and achievements, hence organizational identity. Therefore, Henne and Locke (1985) argue that it is of the organizations’ own interest to support employees job satisfaction to increase the firm’s overall achievements. This goes hand in hand with a statement by Greene (1972), that employees that are satisfied in their job will be more productive, meaning that there is a correlation between productivity and job satisfaction, and hence a correlation of job dissatisfaction and unproductivity.

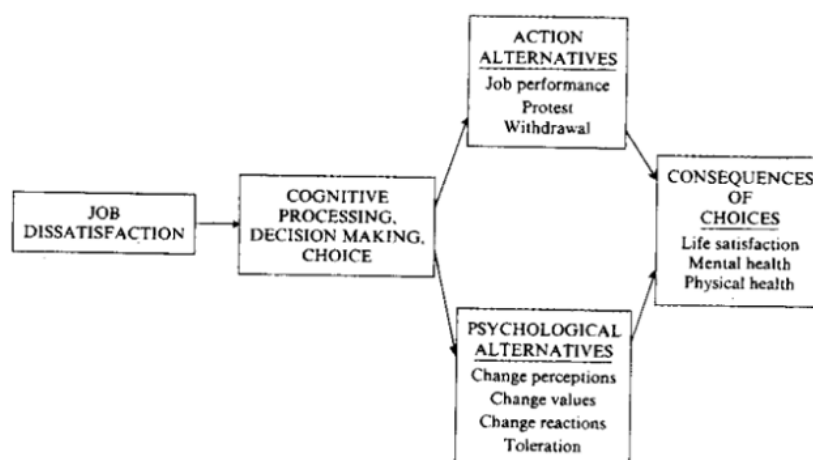


Fig. 2: Model: “Consequences of job dissatisfaction” (Henne and Locke, 1985)

The model “*Consequences of job dissatisfaction*” (see Figure 2) by Henne and Locke (1985), is used as a visualization to describe that there are many different possibilities of outcome as a result of job dissatisfaction. The outcomes will be determined by an individual’s “emotional state”, which is different for every person. Hence, the response to job dissatisfaction will be individually dependent, in combination to the respective organizational environment.

2.1.3 Organizational Change and Identity

Keeping in mind that employees have a need to identify with a commonly understood goal, it becomes clear that change is also impacted by identities and employees’ satisfaction level. Due to the recent and quick growth of the case company, the topic of organizational change is of relevance. Organizational growth requires organizational change and managing growth in an organization can be challenging for company leaders (Tan et al., 2007). This is specifically crucial for companies developing beyond the startup phase, as like this research’s company. When change happens, many different factors interfere and influence the change process, that should be considered by company or change leaders (Palmer et al., 2017).

Smollan and Pio (2017) investigate the factor of stress that may come into play during organizational change. They research the effect of stressful organizational change and the way that employees cope with this stress. Their findings indicate that “Identity in different forms (personal, role social and organisational) emerged as a salient factor, particularly when confidence was challenged, roles were changed, relationships deteriorated and the participant’s value to the group or organisation was questioned.” (Smollan & Pio, 2017, p.1). In other words, identity plays an important factor during moments of stress during organizational change. However, different stages of change usually cause different levels of emotions, such as stress. Cable and Welbourne (1994) identify two orders of change: the first order of change is described as “an event that would not generally result in an emotional or behavioral response strong enough to cause an individual to reevaluate an existing social categorization.” (p.22). This first order of change does not involve any non-gradual changes, such as sudden layoffs in the company, and would therefore be an unlikely cause for employees to reconsider their employee identity or views of the social environment. The main reason for this is the fact that there is no clear and observable change in the direct work environment. The second order of change as explained by Cable and Welbourne (1994), however, entails much more sudden and impactful changes for employees, such as a big reduction of the workforce, pay cuts, or restructuring of self-managed teams. If all these changes were to be implemented

simultaneously, this may result in intense and significant emotional and behavioral responses. These responses may then be the cause of immediate social recategorization: “the employee will reevaluate the importance of their career role, the role within their department, and the family role, most likely resulting in work-related roles being less dominant than before the change.” (p.23). As a result, this social recategorization is likely to result in minimized role commitment and potentially in the identity hierarchy.

2.2 Interpretative Oriented Studies

‘What kind of identities are there in contemporary organizations?’

2.2.1 Identity Theory

The term ‘identities’ can be described as the responses that individuals provide when being asked, "Who am I?" (Stryker & Serpe, 1982, cited in Desrochers, 2004, p. 61). The development of an individual's identity entails a continuous interplay between social and personal definition. Social definitions, including organizational and professional dialogues guiding towards suitable role behavior, which often indicates individuals conforming to these expectations. (Ybema et al., 2009). Furthermore, the establishment “of shared beliefs through mechanisms like 'symbolic violence’” (Bourdieu, 1977; cited in Ybema et al., 2009, p. 301) or the shaping “of 'subjectivity' via 'disciplinary' power-knowledge dynamics” (Foucault, 1972; cited in Ybema et al., 2009, p. 301), play significant roles in this process. Identity theory emerged from researching the underlying reasons for the varying salience, thus importance, of identities within individuals' self-concepts and the factors contributing to shifts in identity salience over time (Stryker, 1968, cited in Stryker & Burke, 2000, p.287). Within identity theory, an individual has several different identities, whereby every single identity is playing a specific role, since “the self is, by definition, a set of responses of an organism to itself” (Stryker, 1968, p.560). Hence, identities are often intertwined within conflict of the inner self due to contradictions (Watson, 2008). This is also where the concept of identity salience is introduced. Identity theory proposes that individuals choose which of their multiple identities should be used for expression in different situations, based on the concept of identity salience (Stets & Serpe, 2013).

“Identity salience is defined as the probability that one will invoke a specific identity across situations. More salient identities are those that have a greater likelihood of being brought into situations either through verbal or behavioral action.” (Stets & Serpe, 2013, p.36).

This quote demonstrates a hierarchical order, called ‘identity salience hierarchy’, in which identity roles are placed in an order according to the likelihood that a specific identity or position will be relevant in particular circumstances (Stryker, 1987). This implies that individuals might actively look for chances to engage in identities that are more prominent, and thus more salient for them (Stets & Serpe, 2013). Moreover, the concept of identity salience is established on the level of commitment towards that specific identity (Hogg et al. 1995, Stets & Serpe, 2013). This specific level of commitment will in turn determine the social structure, based on the extent to which individuals are connected to specific social networks, whose access showcases an individual’s position within a social structure (Stets & Serpe, 2013). The level of commitment of an individual to their identity can be indicated by evaluating how devoted someone is to confirm that specific identity.

Within organizations, individuals often assume different corporate identities, which can contrast with their personas outside of work and sometimes conflict with them (Watson, 2008). Even more, in the workplace, managers are required to represent the corporation and exhibit traits such as expertise, authority, and control, rather than simply expressing their personal selves. According to Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003), managers utilize different organizational discourses as tools to construct their own sense of identity. This has been formally defined as identity work by Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003, p. 1165), whereby people are repeatedly “engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness”. “Identities are constructed as external and internal forces woven together into stories that occasionally can be seen as narratives that join the past, present, and future of people’s self-understanding.” (Sveningsson et al., 2021). The organizational culture is mentioned as one of the external forces that affects someone’s identity construction process, meaning that it contributes to how people understand themselves, their priorities and behavior (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2011; Clarke, Brown, & Hope Hailey, 2009; Knights & Clarke, 2014; Koveshnikov, Vaara, & Ehrnrooth, 2016; cited in Sveningsson et al., 2021). According to Ybema et al. (2009), social identities

result from the interplay between the individual agency and structural influences, shaping perceptions both internally and externally. This process is understood as complex, since it is impacted by various situational factors across different discursive contexts and timeframes. Therefore, it should be noted that social science might always carry a bias (Ybema et al., 2009). Our “I/ eye” (Ybema et al., 2009, p. 314) heavily interprets what we observe, with our own viewpoint being the lens through which we create personal narratives about e.g. our self. This indicates the cruciality to advocate critical self-reflexivity, to remain true to oneself.

Since the development of the identity theory, two different directions developed within one research program, called structural symbolic interactionism (Stryker 1980, cited in Stryker & Burke, 2000, p.285). The objective is to comprehend the interpretation of social frameworks on individual identity, as well as how individual identity shapes social interactions. One direction, Stryker's version, examines how social environments shape our identities and behaviors in social situations, while the other direction developed by Burke, delves into how our individual thoughts and emotions interpret our interactions with others (Stryker & Burke, 2000; Desrochers, 2004). These two directions are mirrored in identity work, which is described by Watson (2008), as involving both internal reflection and external engagement with society's available social identities. It's important to distinguish between personal identity and social identities shaped by discourse for analysis. This distinction is further explained by Jenkins (1996, p. 20; cited in Watson, 2008, p.130), as:

“Individual identity - embodied in selfhood - is not meaningful in isolation from the social world of other people. Individuals are unique and variable, but selfhood is thoroughly socially constructed: in the processes of primary and subsequent socialisation, and in the ongoing processes of social interaction within which individuals define and redefine themselves and others throughout their lives.”

2.2.2 Organizational Identity

A further distinction added to one's personal and social identity is the organizational identity. In alignment with Albert and Whetten (1985) from a functionalistic stance, Ashforth and Mael (1995) agree to the concept of organizational identity representing the core of an organization, explaining organizational identity as a core set of attributes that, together, form the essence of the organization. Corley et al. (2006) take the statement one step further and describe this to be the soul of the organization. Taking the idea that the identity of an organization is interpreted

by the employees, or that the meaning of a mission statement is dependent on the reader into mind, it represents a 'social constructionist' way of perceiving organizational identity (Corley et al., 2006). This means that the perception of the organization's identity is shaped by the individual perspectives of its employees. One of the questions around this social construction would be how this identity is constructed (Nica & Potcovaru, 2014). An important factor in shaping the general idea about an organizations' identity, is the interactions and discussions that employees of an organization have amongst each other (Ravasi & Schultz, 2006).

While it may seem contradicting to state that organizations can have multiple organizational identities, Solomon and Casey (2017) draw on the argument that organizations can have multiple identities in the same way that individuals can have multiple identities. For example, individuals can identify themselves through their ethnicity, but also through a demographic group in society. In this same line of reasoning, one could state that not every employee within an organization may have the same perception of the organization's identity (Martin, 2002). Not only can an organization have multiple identities, but an organization can also have contradicting identities (Zinkstein, 2018). One example is presented in research done by Foreman and Whetten (2002). Within their study, participants described their employer in two different and rather contradicting ways: on the one hand the organization was described as 'family friendly' with a 'focus on traditions', but on the other hand the organization was described as a business with their focus on profit, financial growth, and self-interest. This difference in view on an organization's identity may be affected by the individual employee identity. The way that someone perceives themselves, and the way that someone places themselves within their organization, has an impact on the perception of the organization (Zinkstein, 2018). Hence, employee identity and organizational identity are indisputably linked.

Furthermore, research shows that work and the employer are important factors when analyzing people's identity, respecting organizational identity (Judge et al., 2020). Over fifty percent of the adult population who are not retired dedicate most of their waking time to their jobs. Hence, people's employment plays a crucial part in their identity. Employee identity within an organization can be understood as the discovery of how to integrate in the company and portray identities that are both acceptable to their close colleagues and give them some degree of flexibility, independence, and power within the company (Fenwick, 2010). To recognize one's employee identity is of significance for employees to find personal fulfillment and satisfaction

in their employment (Driver, 2017). Hereby, motivation plays a crucial role during the complicated process towards reaching a certain employee identity. It is suggested that motivation can serve as an opportunity for employees to gain insight and express their sense of identity as well as a tool for reaching objectives (Johnson et al., 2010). This indicates the importance that employees hold as a social resource within an organization. According to Locke (1976), motivation enhances job satisfaction. These can vary per individual, depending on everyone's own identity (Yurtseven & Halici, 2012).

Employees who feel a strong sense of belonging are over six times more inclined to be actively engaged to reach organizations goals, compared to those with less sense of belonging (Pettita & Ghezzi, 2023). Consequently, dissatisfied and disconnected employees can become an issue for organizations and their identity. Research by Pettita and Ghezzi (2023), has proved that an increased workplace disconnectedness leads to increased distrust and bitterness at work and may ultimately reduce employees' emotional energy. Because of this, disengagement and cynicism at work can be linked to decreased performance, reduced, or interfered work-life balance and could eventually affect the individual's mental well-being. When further delving into research on work-life balance and thus flexibility, it becomes clear that there are different sorts of flexibility that can have an impact on work-life balance, and therefore also on job-satisfaction (Goudswaard & de Nanteuil, 2000). There is a difference between quantitative and qualitative flexibility, also known as functional flexibility. Quantitative flexibility concerns the opportunity to adjust the quantity of labor utilizing flexibility, as e.g. temporary work, part-time work, or in general, having flexible working hours. Qualitative flexibility on the other hand relates to the skills of employees and the standard of work produced, which entails e.g. autonomy at work, teamwork, job variation and rotation. A study by Origo and Pagani (2008) has concluded that "different forms of flexibility produce different impacts on job satisfaction" (p.540). While the study showed that quantitative flexibility has no effect on job satisfaction, qualitative flexibility has a positive effect on job satisfaction, being closely related to intrinsic factors and motivators.

The literature above shows that organizations are dependent on the job satisfaction levels of their employees (Pettita & Ghezzi, 2023), and research has been done to identify "job satisfaction towards traditional (office) culture and work from home culture" (Sarasu, 2021). This research shows that most of the respondents of that research group are more satisfied with their working-from-home culture than they are with their traditional office culture. While this

could be true for any organization for numerous reasons, research by Hills (2015) discusses the negative effects that “pessimistic, gloomy, and cynical” employees can have on any office culture. Their research states that an overly pessimistic team member can easily spread their negativity to other people within the team, if the manager of that team would not interfere.

When it comes to office layout rather than office culture, however, Haynes (2008) finds that there is no clear connection between the office layout and productivity of employees.

2.2.3 Organizational Change and Identity

Further relevant for this studies case company is the topic of organizational change in connection with remote working and the relation to employee identity. As found in the previous section, according to Haynes (2008), there is no straightforward correlation between an office culture and the productivity levels of its employees. A vastly increasing number of employees have experienced the organizational change to remote working due to strict instructions to work from home during the COVID-19 pandemic (Felstead, 2022). In this context, working remotely means working outside of the premises, usually an office, of the employer. Due to the pandemic restrictions, the popularity of remote working increased (Felstead, 2022). In April 2020, 37% of working people in Europe reported to work remotely, with rates exceeding 50% in the Netherlands and 35% in the United States (Ahrendt, 2021). Given the increasing number of employees working remotely, traits that might be taken for granted in an office environment, such as processes and company culture, need to be refined, in order to maintain a positive and efficient working environment (Phillips, 2020). Hence, it is crucial that company leaders develop and redefine their qualities to properly lead and manage a remote workforce. These qualities are “trust, respect, communication, shared values, and culture” (Phillips, 2020, p. 1).

McPhail et al. (2023) researched the impact of the transformation to an increasing remote workforce, looking at people, productivity, and planet, whereby this research focusses on the first two. Focusing on 'people,' it is found that employee wellbeing, remote or onsite, can positively or negatively be interpreted by factors like autonomy, control, and flexibility. Trust in organizational leaders also correlates with positive remote work experiences. When it comes to 'productivity', the sudden change to working remotely has had a definite impact as well (Collings et al., 2021). Especially during the pandemic itself, it was challenging for company leaders to manage the tension between employees' concerns around wellbeing, while simultaneously managing the organizations' performance (Bose et al., 2022; Mattera et al.,

2021). Once the pandemic stabilized many organizations started to experience the negative consequences of having many remote employees, for example by employees who were “quiet quitting” (McPhail et al., 2023). According to Aydin (2022), “quiet quitting refers to the rejection that work should be at the heart of the personal life.” Being out of direct sight of a superior, which is the case when working remotely, makes it easier to be less productive without having to face the consequences as an employee. While some studies reveal that productivity when working from home reduces due to loss of quick (face to face) communication and poor telecommunication environments (Morikawa, 2020), other studies show the opposite result (Barrero et al., 2021).

Organizational change is not only impacting performance but might directly impact employee identity. Looking at remote employees’ sense of belonging within a company, research shows that remote employees may struggle with establishing and maintaining interpersonal and informal connections with the organization and their colleagues (Dery & Hafermalz, 2016). As interpersonal connections pose to be an important contributor to one’s self-view (Hogg, 2016), the lack of these connections could be the cause of minimized employee identification. Hafermalz and Riemer (2016) share the concern that employees who solely work remotely will experience social isolation. Their study shows that a seemingly unimportant, virtual coffee chat would build and increase the remote employees’ sense of belonging within the team and organization. In turn, this increased sense of belonging will contribute to the team’s performance. Other research, however, shows different results. Ten Broeke (2022) researches the connection between work location and feeling of belonging with the organization, and no significant connection was found. While there was no connection, the researcher does state that interaction between colleagues might have changed the outcome of that research, as it may influence the overall sense of belonging with the company. Besides, they state that remote working may not affect workplace belonging negatively anymore, as employees have had significant time to get used to a new remote-working set up since the start of the global pandemic in 2020.

Lastly, Beau and Jerman (2024) investigate the effects of remote working on social bonding activities. Their research shows that remote employees are less inclined to get involved with the organizations’ group activities. Besides, their working experience is individualized and ‘spontaneous mutual support mechanisms’ are minimized. Even though work-life balance is frequently mentioned as positive results of working remotely, reduced social bonding between

colleagues is an evident downside. Hence, their research concludes that “the place of work is not just a setting, but one of the chief mechanisms of social bonding at work.” (p.1). As social bonding, and thus interpersonal connection, is seen as important interpretation of sense of belonging with a company (Hogg, 2016), working remotely may have a negative effect on an employees’ identification with their organization.

2.3 Critical Oriented Studies

‘Why is identity impacted in contemporary organizations?’

2.3.1 Identity Theory

The variation and difficulty in analyzing identity is further explained by Stryker and Burke (2000), differentiating between three different practices of identity. Firstly, identity refers to the culture of people. Secondly, identity is described as a “common identification with a collectivity or social category” (p.284). Thirdly, identity is explained as “[part] of a self-composed ... [meaning] that persons attach to the multiple roles they typically play in highly differentiated contemporary societies” (p.284). The multiple roles that identities take on can also be formed through an organization, which showcases a way why identity might be impacted in contemporary organizations.

2.3.2 Organizational Identity

Organizational identity is not solely about the factors that an organization radiates to the outside world but is also about sense-making for its employees (Corley & Gioia, 2003). Sense-making for an individual is all about forming ideas about “what’s going on” (Palmer et al., 2017, p.298); giving meaning to a certain action, message or phenomenon. The organizational identity instills significance to the organizations’ employees beyond their individual selves, meaning that the collective entity takes precedence over the individual identity (Corley et al., 2006). Thus, where earlier statements indicate the identity of an organization is highly influenced by the needs, preferences and identities of its employees, it must be noted that this interplay works both ways. According to Sveningsson et al. (2021, p.590) “organizations consist of roles, cultures, values, power relations, and hierarchical structures that will also mediate and regulate people’s

meaning-making, motivations, and interactions.” Cole and Bruch (2006) also mention that hierarchical structure is a factor that may influence the view that employees have on the organizational identity of their employer. Alvesson (1989, p.6) describes organizational structure in its most simplistic sense as “the result of the division of labor and the authority hierarchy”. Within his research, Alvesson (1989) discusses that bigger companies often have more hierarchical levels with increased specialization, formalization and decentralized decision making. Younger, flexible, and “organic” organizations, on the other hand, usually place an emphasis on the free flow of communications across hierarchical levels – if present – in addition to participative decision making and decentralization. Further research shows that a collaborative working atmosphere positively impacts job satisfaction and reduces the impact on conflict (Ghitulescu, 2018), which, in turn, positively enhances employee identification levels. Cole and Bruch (2006) have conducted research on organizational identity strength, organizational identity, and organizational commitment. Within their study they have made a distinction between management and employees, and the identification with the organization (and thus turnover intentions) turned out to be different for these two groups. Therefore, it can be concluded that a strict hierarchical structure within a company may result in different levels of identification within a company. Where the differences in employee identification levels might appear to be a downside to having a strict hierarchical structure, Halevy et al. (2011, p.1) identify a positive correlation between organizational hierarchy and enhanced performance. They find that hierarchy “creates a psychologically rewarding environment; motivates performance through hierarchy-related incentives; capitalizes on the complementary psychological effects of having versus lacking power; supports division of labor, and, as a result, coordination; and reduces conflict and enhance voluntary cooperation.”

With regards to the previous critical-focused research, it becomes evident that employee identity is impacted by leadership. Through value recognition and equal treatment, ethical leadership develops employee identity and promotes "organizational citizenship behavior", particularly when dealing with peer exclusion (Zhang et al., 2023). In contrast, unethical leadership can weaken employees' feelings of belonging and connection to the organization through not identifying with its culture. It becomes clear that within an organization, employee's identity is (continuously) formed by different external factors that have an influence on the employee (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2016).

Within their paper, Alvesson and Willmott (2002) explore how organizations and managers control their employees by shaping their identities. They look at how employees are encouraged to see themselves and their work in a way that aligns with the goals set by the leaders of the organization. This emphasis on identity relates to other studies about normative control, which is how organizations use norms and values to guide behavior. Within their study, Alvesson and Willmott (2002) state that managers may – intentionally or not – influence employees’ self-perception, promoting a sense of “coherence, distinctiveness, and commitment” (p.1). However, this type of control is not a standalone process, and there are other internal and external pressures that affect how employees see themselves. Hence, a tension between these different pressures may exist, which may create opportunities for the employees to challenge or resist the organization’s control.

Yet, this control goes both ways. Managers also see themselves influenced by several determinants. The concept of personal management is influenced by various factors. External forces, including role expectations and societal norms regarding leadership, play a role. Additionally, individual personality traits and life experiences shape one's approach to management. In essence, identities in managerial roles are shaped by both external demands and internal characteristics, such as personality and acquired beliefs about work and leadership. Furthermore, Sveningsson and Alvesson (2016) note that individuals continuously shape and refine their identities in response to various influences through a process called identity work. This process involves shaping, repairing, maintaining, and revising interpretations to form cohesive views of themselves and their abilities (p.39). This goes hand in hand with continuous change and adaptation in organizations nowadays. “Working life in many organizations today is often described as being changeable, unstable, confusing and contradictory” (p.35). While change and instability might be exaggerated, rapid and conflicting demands, leading to fragmented working conditions, are common in modern workplaces. This also results in managers being affected by turbulence and conflicting demands for change, given their responsibility for organizational progress and their relatively proactive and strong resource position. Therefore, in this complex and fragmented world, individuals clash with conflicting ideals and demands, leading to struggles with their personal identity (Sennett, 1998; cited in Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2016, p.34).

2.3.3 Organizational Change and Identity

Looking at the reason why identity is impacted in contemporary organizations, organizational change may have a direct impact on someone's identity. Periods of organizational change often go hand in hand with resistance to this change, which is a "socially constructed phenomenon that is generated and defined through interaction" as explained by Van Dijk and Van Dick (2009, p.1). They also state that change within an organization may pose a threat to an employees' work-based identity, which then results in resistance to change as a self-enhancement strategy. This resistance to change amongst employees then continues to influence the leaders' work-based identity, which causes their response to employees' resistance to include self-enhancement strategies as well. Van Dijk and Van Dick (2009) therefore recommend focusing on how change affects our sense of identity rather than just its practical implications, which could eventually improve navigating organizational change. This suggestion is also formulated by Cable and Welbourne (1994, p.2), who state that "a more thorough understanding of the effect of these [change] programs on an individual's role within the organization is necessary." According to Ashforth (2001; cited in Sveningsson et al., 2021), having a clear sense of the self might help to position ourselves in changing contexts, and to attach a certain meaning to what one thinks, feels, and experiences. Besides, he states that it may provide a sense of control when the context around us changes.

Sanda (2011) researched how organizational change was impacted by the dynamics of employee identity. This research showed that the personal core values of these employees had a significant impact on their levels of resistance towards the change initiatives within their company. Within this specific case study, the employees distrusted the organization's change process, and management were hesitant to let go of their independent working style by adopting a more teamwork-oriented approach. In the end, it became evident that the employees and management were too attached to their self-identities which caused the change initiatives of the organization to fail. Hence, as indicated by Van Dijk and Van Dick (2009) and Cable and Welbourne (1994), it would have been beneficial for this organization to put their focus on the employees' and managements' perception of their identity in relation to the organizational change, to reduce the severity of the resistance to the change.

When focusing on managers in moments of change, it is clear that 'being a manager' is not simply about leading others; "managers themselves are subject to other people's attempts to control and regulate both managerial work and managerial identity (Sinclair, 2011; cited in

Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2016, p.242). Sveningsson and Alvesson (2016) describe multiple challenging situations in which it may be difficult for managers to maintain a stable self-view, and thus, identity. Most of these challenging situations are happening in a context of change, which is often a stressful situation, as described earlier (Smollan & Pio, 2017).

“... the identity often finds itself at odds in some way with the organizational situation, demands, expectations and other managerial ideals.” (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2016, p.245)

To overcome the identity challenges, Sveningsson and Alvesson (2016) suggest five forms of identity work. Two of the five identity works signify a certain degree of harmony or moderate friction, while the others are described and utilized in contexts with different degrees of difficulty, which are labelled as identity struggles. Again, it becomes clear that different levels of struggles and stress, often related to change, result in different levels of emotion (Cable & Welbourne, 1994; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2016).

2.4 Chapter Summary

The *functionalistic oriented studies* start by delving into social identity theory, including differences and similarities to identity theory. Social identity theory leads to researching organizational identity, how the organization influences its employee's identity, and differentiating the term's 'identity' and 'culture'. Within the topic of organizational change and identity, the growth of (startup) companies is analyzed, specifically with regards to stress as interfering factor. This technical section examines the question '*how do we see identity in contemporary organizations?*'.

Within the *interpretative oriented studies*, topics on identity theory are discussed, in terms of how the 'self' is complex and influenced and can be interpreted in many ways. Furthermore, we delved in to how job satisfaction and office culture have an impact on the organizations and employee's identity, and how motivation contributes. Lastly, literature on organizational change in terms of positive and negative impacts of remote work on identity are outlined. The interpretative section takes an explanatory approach to the questions '*what kind of identities are there in contemporary organizations?*'.

By delving into the *critical oriented studies*, we outline how employees' sense-making is connected to organizational identity, as well as how organizations can shape their employees' identities. Furthermore, this section analyses the impact organizational change on identity in form of pressures, like resistance. This section aims to take a critical stance on the question 'why is identity impacted in contemporary organizations?'.

3. Methodology

Within the methodology, the legitimacy of the research is confirmed by aiming to answer the question below, to validate the reliable outcome (Styhre, 2013).

What factors affect identification of onsite and remote employees in contemporary organizations on an individual, organizational, and group level?

To do so, this chapter includes a detailed insight into the reasoning behind the research approach, followed by an explanation about the data collection, further divided into specifics about the selection of data, and background of the interview approach. Thereafter the methodological chapter delves into clarification on the data analyses processes utilized and an in-depth evaluation of critical and ethical reflection.

3.1 Research Approach

The study is based on qualitative research methods, due to the exploratory nature of the relevant research on this subject and the novelty of the findings (Pathak et al., 2013). In recent decades, social sciences have embraced qualitative methods, offering a variety of research options and guidance (Prasad, 2018). Qualitative methods search for patterns, connections, and explanations for a specific situation (Bouncken et al., 2021). Therefore, this study seeks to investigate concepts in detail in an abductive manner. While deduction is often used to assess derivability, abductive analysis is employed to produce explanation (Paul, 1993). A more detailed differentiation is given by Åsvoll (2013), as “abduction (firstness) plays the role of generating new ideas or hypotheses; deduction (secondness) functions as evaluating the hypotheses; and induction (thirdness) is justifying of the hypothesis with empirical data” (p.290). Abduction is further explained by Peirce (1960; cited in Åsvoll, 2013) as the initial phase of any scientific inquiry, as well as all processes involving interpretation. The process involves assuming preliminary findings as accurate, though uncertain, and determining the best explanatory hypothesis through empirical research (Åsvoll, 2013). Facts are structured in an evident manner known as abduction, which involves exploring potential explanatory patterns

within them, thus recognizing and seeing these patterns (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2018). This aligns with this study, since preliminary research has been conducted, in which patterns were found in “(presumed) relevant empirical data” (Åsvoll, 2013, p.298) that were analyzed and evaluated in further research. However, abductive studies also entail taking unknown and surprising development into consideration, meaning to remain open-minded and attentive to new outcomes.

We utilize the Symbolic Interactionist Tradition (SIT) for this research, as this tradition largely focuses on “social construction from the standpoint of multiple roles, self-images and identities” (Prasad, 2018, p. 27). Moreover, SIT is known for its frequent and suitable use for organizational studies. As this research is an organizational study, clear connections to how individuals behave in social situations can be evaluated. Herbert Blumer's SIT highlights that individuals create meaning through social interactions (Prasad, 2018, p. 21). Objects and events gain meaning from these individual interpretations, making interviews valuable for research. Blumer, drawing on Mead, assumes that meanings derive from social interactions and are continuously reshaped. Thus, SIT views all social aspects as symbolic, with objects, events, and actions carrying personal significance.

Considering the fundamental importance of the ‘self’ in SIT, this tradition has found to be most suitable for this study with the guiding research topic on employee identity. According to Prasad (2018), self-perceptions, influenced by societal roles, thus also within the job, play a significant role in how individuals assign meaning to objects and events, guiding their actions and feelings. People’s constant adoption of different roles shapes our interpretation of the world around us. So, also self-images are closely linked to the various roles that an individual adopts within society. Hence, in changing social contexts, certain identities may become more prominent than others. By utilizing SIT, the identities of the employees in their work environment, as explained in Hogg’s SIT (2016), are researched through investigating a series of individual interpretations, with the aim of finding symbolic meaning behind these interpretations (Prasad, 2018).

3.2 Data Collection

The word ‘data’ has been defined by Galloway (2012, p.18; cited in Styhre, 2013, p.56) as “the things that have been given”, indicating that data is raw material when collected. More in-depth, it has been defined as “uninterpreted inscriptions, graphs recording variation over time, photographs, tables, displays” by Hacking in 1992 (p.48; cited in Styhre, 2013, p.56). During the data collection phase, symbolic interactionists are interested in immersing themselves in the everyday lives of the individuals they study and comprehending these experiences, in form of raw data, from the viewpoints of the people involved.

3.2.1 Selection

This study utilizes a non-probability sampling method. Originally, non-probability sampling was described as departing from the principles of probability sampling (Vehovar et al., 2016). Also, it involves including units with uncertain probabilities in a sample, or some of these probabilities are acknowledged to be zero. This is reasonable given the limited sample size and the qualitative nature of the study. To locate interviewees, the purposive sampling technique has been applied. In order to provide important insights that cannot be obtained in any other way, we have purposefully selected particular individuals (Taherdoost, 2016). The selection is based on our judgment, seeking for a sample that can be considered overall representative for the whole organization (Vehovar et al., 2016). This has led to a variety of departments and locations represented in the study.

Within this research, a target population has been defined to be able to collect the most suitable raw data. The target population are remote and onsite employees of Azure. Hereby, onsite employees work in one of the European offices, while remote employees can be based worldwide, working from home. It should be noted that remote employees in this study are those not residing in countries with Azure offices. The research focuses on employees aged between 28 to 43, due to the company's average age of 35 years (Bruins, 2024). This population fits with SIT, as we “seek an intimate understanding of social situations largely from the standpoint of participants themselves.” (Prasad, 2018, p. 23).

3.2.2 Interviews

Semi-structured interviews provide the researcher with an opportunity for interaction and are less organized, allowing for an in-depth exploration of certain areas of interest (Kabir, 2016). Furthermore, it enables the interviewer to ask further and deviate from a pre-prepared script, with the aim to clarify, show interest and gain an increased amount of data. Using interviews for data collection aligns well with SIT, allowing researchers to immerse themselves in participants' daily lives, gaining insight into their perspectives firsthand (Prasad, 2018). Moreover, using semi-structured interview methods allows the interviewers to go in-depth and more focused on meaning, questioning the 'how' rather than the 'what'. Lastly, by asking interviewees how they see themselves in various social contexts, these semi-structured interviews will pave the way for investigating themes of self-identity.

The interviews' foundation is built on the three topics derived from the literature review, namely employee identity, company culture, and remote working. The research proposal included four preliminary interviews to guide towards formulating a tentative research question, in combination with the preliminary literature review findings. These interviews comprised two onsite and two remote employees and led to a basis for further research. After the research proposal was approved, ten additional interviews were conducted. Out of the ten participants, five were conducted with onsite employees and five with remote employees. For these interviews, the interview script has been slightly adapted to get better and more identity theory-related insights. This adaptation mainly included taking the word 'remote work' out of all research questions, besides the last question. By doing so, the interviewees had more freedom to take the conversation in any direction that they deemed relevant, rather than being steered to talk about their (non-) remote working location. Furthermore, the aim of the slight adaptation was to find out more specifically about the participants identity, asking broader questions focusing on answering the question 'Who am I?'.

All 14 interviews were held online via Microsoft Teams and Google Meet. Although the option existed to do face-to-face interviews with onsite employees in the office, we decided against doing so in order to have an equal setting for all participants. Face-to-face interviews might give the researcher the option to take other influencing factors into consideration which might impact the outcome and comparison to remote employees. All interviews were recorded and transcribed by means of using the application 'Otter', a real-time transcriber. This application has been utilized in accordance with the interviewees. The interviewees' personal data,

including their introduction, examples given, and other specific information that could be traced back to the individual, has been anonymized.

3.3 Data Analysis

After collecting raw data by means of interviewing 14 participants, “extracting information from data ... is a discontinuous, unpredictable process” (Boisot, 1998, p.31; cited in Styhre, 2013, p.58). To do so, an abductive strategy will be employed to analyze the interviews, which also aligns with the SIT way of analyzing data since both, the strategy and tradition, adopt an open-ended stance (Prasad, 2018). Working within the SIT framework, it involves closely examining processes. Symbolic interactionists are driven to explore how particular realities are constructed, which is specifically in focus during the data analysis phase.

Similarly to the interviews baseline, the three concepts of the preliminary literature review – employee identity, company culture, and remote working – have also been applied within the data analysis stage. These topics constitute the basis for a thematic analysis of the interviews and enhance order and a common ground within the study. Hereby, the objective was to find recurring themes and connections in the data samples. Furthermore, color coding was used as an analytical approach for all interviews to provide a better and faster overview. Coding has been defined as "the analytical processes through which data are fractured, conceptualized, and integrated to form theory" by Strauss and Corbin (1998; cited in Styhre, 2013, p.59). Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018) defined activities in analytical work that served as a guideline in this research. These activities are named ‘sorting’, ‘reducing’, and ‘arguing’. Within the sorting process, researchers become familiar with their data and find patterns. Thereafter, to streamline the data with the aim to make it more manageable for detailed examination, we use the reducing process. Analyzing qualitative data involves selecting what to focus on and narrowing down, since it is not feasible to include everything that has been found in the interviews. Lastly, within the process of arguing, we make sense and create a meaning from the data collected and analyzed so far. During the process of arguing, the chapter about findings is generated. The following describes how Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018) processes were adapted in this specific research.

While *'sorting'*, we utilized the three topics generated from the preliminary literature review that also laid the basis for the interviews. This study uses color coding throughout Rennstam and Wästerfors processes, to further organize the data. Sentences marked in blue indicate information on **employee identity**, red-colored sentences entail information on **company culture**, and **remote working** information is marked in green. These findings have been sorted in a first data analysis table to create an overview.

During the *'reducing'* data process, a second round of color coding is performed within the first data analysis table and placed in a second data analysis table. New themes were found, which aligns with SIT, by creating meaning through symbols, symbolizing the relation between the company and the self-images of the participants (Prasad, 2018). According to Prasad (2018, p.21) "Office rituals, organizational policies, managerial styles, ... are all meaningful in the sense that they evoke a variety of emotions and responses to them", which is why work-related matters are researched. Thus, to further reduce, the second thematic content analysis is color coded with the following themes: **team spirit**, growth opportunities, **interpersonal connections**, **motivation and sense of belonging**, and **downsides / benefits** of partially remote teams.

The last process of *'arguing'* implies engaging in theorizing, while balancing creativity and systematic thinking, which leads to theoretical outcomes. Within the findings chapter, we established a narrative to guide the reader through the empirical data. Before diving into this narrative, all fourteen interviewees are introduced, stating their name, position, department and working location. The narrative is closely linked to the color-coding activity, leading the reader through a detailed understanding on how to interpret the employee's identity from different angles. The themes that were established from the color-coding activity are evaluated from both the onsite and remote perspectives. Within the analysis we are taking an interpretative stance, but still taking inspiration from different approaches, like the functionalistic, as well.

3.4 Critical Reflection

The aim of the critical reflection is to break free from limiting comprehension and thought patterns, to foster fresh perspectives and opportunities for change (Morley, 2008). During the data collection there are several instances in which biases could appear. This critical reflection serves to evaluate the impact the possible biases could have on the outcome of this research.

Selection bias could be a topic since interviewees were only semi-randomly chosen. Due to the purposive sampling method, thus non-probability sampling, interviews were not completely randomly chosen. Reason for this is that we wanted to avoid a possible pattern in the data and have therefore chosen to select employees from specific departments to have a more diverse outcome and all departments represented. Furthermore, it should be noted that the scope faces an under-coverage, since only 14 interviews were conducted, which may, with approximately 300 employees, not represent the identity of all employees. Since we aimed to have the most diverse sample and chose non-probability sampling for this reason, it can be insured that this bias is of no relevance. (Smith & Noble, 2014)

A *data collection bias* that might influence response bias is that the interviews were taken online due to the interviewees being spread around the world. The disadvantage of non-face-to-face interviews is that it might be harder for us to analyze reactions and emotions due to a lack of visible body language. We tried to avoid another form of data collection bias that may have come up due to the interviewees being introduced to the research topic. In the introduction of the interview, the researcher mentioned the topic, clarifying the meaning of employee identity and introducing remote and onsite work as a research topic. However, within the research questions, the words ‘employee identity’ and ‘remote’ and ‘onsite work’ were not mentioned, with the goal to not lead interviewees to an answer but rather hear their thinking process. Therefore, it can be concluded that information bias has had only little influence. Furthermore, as a data collection bias, interviewees could feel an urge to answer in a specific way since one of us is a colleague, working in the HR department at the case company, and might therefore trigger certain responses. Yet, since all interviews have been recorded and listened to by the other researcher not taking part in the interview, interviewer bias should not have a big influence on the outcome of this research. Furthermore, it was specifically mentioned that the research is done for Lund University and not for the respective company. (Smith & Noble, 2014)

Lastly, the data analysis is prone to bias. Here, *analysis bias* comes into play, where it is important to note that one researcher is working in the Human Resources department, which means that personal feelings need to be considered. In this regard, the researcher owns a personal employee identity that could potentially influence the research outcome. Contradictorily, employees might feel more comfortable speaking to a trusted person within

the company. Nevertheless, all interviews have been recorded and listened to by the other researcher to evaluate if researcher bias could have an influence. Because of this, the chance of researcher bias has decreased. (Smith & Noble, 2014)

3.5 Ethical Reflections

Within the ethical reflection section, we think about moral questions and lay a foundation to understand the values that shape their choices in the data collection and analysis.

The case companies' name 'Azure B.V.' is a pseudonym for the actual name of the case company, which has been altered in agreement with the contact person at the case company for anonymity purposes. Furthermore, all interviewees were informed that their participation is anonymous. While this information was already provided in the interview email invite, it was mentioned again at the start of the interview. Anonymity of interviewees increases confidentiality and trust which, in turn, results in more truthful, hence valuable outcome of the research. To maintain their anonymity, the interviewees' names, position, department, and working location as introduced in the empirical findings chapter, are altered. Lastly, all personal information that indicates the identity of a participant is changed in the interview scripts.

Confidentiality and an agreement also include asking for consent to voice record and transcribe the interviews. The agreement entails that all recordings will be deleted once this research paper has been graded.

3.6 Chapter Summary

The figure below summarizes the study’s data collection and analysis methods.

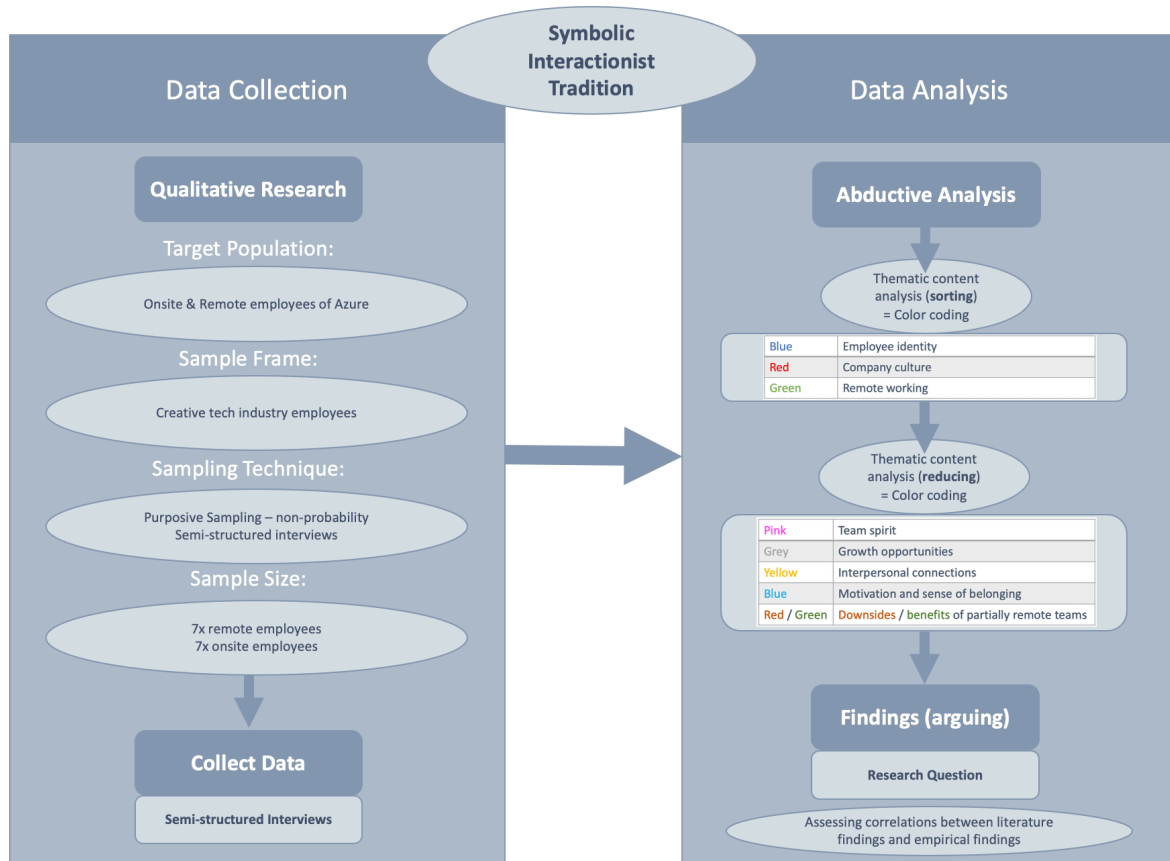


Fig. 3: Research methodology summary

4. Findings

4.1 Setting the Scene at Azure

The following narrative aims to provide the reader with an image of what is going on at the case company. (Bruins, 2024)

The organization, Azure, was founded in the year 1999 by its two founders: Barend and Freek. Where the company started as a creative design agency, the focus was quickly set on a digital alternative. Barend and Freek found a gap in the advertising agency market, and they knew that the future of the advertisement business did not lay in photography and videography, but in a much more flexible, cost effective, and time efficient way of retrieving similar - if not better - photorealistic images: Computer Generated Imagery (CGI). CGI, or 3D imagery, is often used in the world of advertisement, film, or gaming. While 3D technology can be used for multiple purposes and in different ways, Azure uses this technology to create hyper realistic product visualizations. In simpler terms, this means that Azure can produce images that will look like photos or videos, while they are in fact completely designed within specific 3D software. Anyone who is not used to working with such images - like most customers - will not be able to see the difference between a product picture, or a 3D product visualization. Creating these images within 3D software provides the company with the opportunity to make the product images much more aesthetically pleasing, which is an appealing promise for Azure's (future) clients. To this point, Azure works with the biggest brands in the automotive, consumer products, healthcare, and fashion industries. All the work for these clients is done on a project basis - where some projects are as quick as a couple of days, other projects last a few months at the longest. The industry that Azure operates in is a highly fast paced industry, so deadlines are usually tight, and boundaries may need to be pushed to make delivery times.

While the company was founded in a western European country, Barend and Freek opened another office in an eastern European country when they had the opportunity to expand their business. Up to the year 2020, Azure's employees worked from either of the company's offices. Although teams were split up in different locations, and online communication had been necessary for a long time, there were no fully remote employees at that time.

4.1.1 Growth at Azure

As the pandemic hit at the start of 2020, the company faced a sudden hiring freeze, just as many other companies in the industry. Clients had to cut their advertising and marketing budgets, and the uncertain future did not provide a bright perspective for the company. However, the tides turned as big brands decided to look for alternative ways to create their product images. These companies would previously design their product, after which they would produce their product, followed up by a photo or video shoot, to eventually edit these photos and videos before they were uploaded on their website or used for their advertisement campaign. However, with all the strict regulations during the pandemic, this way of working was not possible anymore. This is when Azure was able to take a lot of new clients on board, since Azure's services did not require any face-to-face meetings or other in-person activity.

This means that, from the year 2021, Azure has organically grown to almost triple its workforce and clients. With around 70-80 employees at the start of 2021, Azure had almost 300 employees at the start of 2024. Moreover, the hiring pool of the company was not restricted to two countries anymore. Since most of the employees started to work from home, given the COVID-19 regulations, it did not matter anymore from what country Azure's employees would work. This development opened up new opportunities, and the company could hire anyone, from anywhere - as long as the internet connection was decent and English was fluently spoken. By the start of 2024, around 55% of Azure's workforce worked remotely, from a country that does not have an Azure office. Employees are also not limited to work within European time zones, which makes it possible for projects to be worked on around the clock. Currently, the company has employees in almost every European country, but also in, for example, the Philippines, South Africa, Brazil, Mexico, and the USA.

Such growth and change within a company also mean that the company needs to adjust its processes and workways. Certain processes might work for a team of ten people, but these processes quickly become too manual when the workload increases, and the team grows to 30+ people in a relatively short time span. Besides more automated workflows, the company also had to find a way to stay connected to all their employees all over the world. Teams suddenly consisted of team members from a range of different nationalities, backgrounds and time zones, and needed to find a way to work together from other sides of the world. A split started to develop between onsite employees and remote employees.

4.1.2 Employees at Azure

The industry of 3D imagery draws the attention of creative and tech-oriented employees. That means that Azure’s workforce consists of many kinds of people, from introverted to more extraverted individuals. Where some people are happy to work from their own home office every day of the week, others decide to go to the office for social purposes. Within this research, we have spoken with onsite and remote employees of Azure. The selection of interviewees is diverse and consists of men and women, and people with different functions within the company, such as 3D Artists and Project Managers, from different departments of the company, such as ‘Automotive’, ‘Fashion’, ‘Consumer Products’, and ‘Healthcare’. Within Azure, these departments are referred to as Verticals.

Within this research, onsite and remote employees play a key role in the narrative around Azure’s organizational and employees’ identities. Hence, these two groups will be represented in this ‘Findings’ section by means of hearing the employees’ voices. Please see the following page for an overview of the fourteen employees that have been interviewed. The quotes of these fourteen employees of Azure are retrieved by means of semi-structured interview.

Name	Position	Department	Working location
Karel	HR Generalist	HR	Onsite
Isabelle	Sales Manager	Sales	Onsite
Valeria	Project Manager	Fashion Vertical	Onsite
Will	3D Artist	Automotive Vertical	Onsite
Robert	Motion Designer	Creative	Onsite
Sam	Controller	Finance	Onsite
Cristina	Project Manager	Healthcare Vertical	Onsite
Juan	Lead 3D Artist	Automotive Vertical	Remote
Max	Art Director	Creative	Remote
Ava	3D Artist	Fashion Vertical	Remote
Sofia	Frontend Developer	Automotive Vertical	Remote
Joseph	Senior Project Manager	Consumer Products Vertical	Remote
Daniel	3D Artist	Automotive Vertical	Remote
Danika	3D Artist	Fashion Vertical	Remote

4.2 Empirical Findings

Based on the case as described above, this section with the empirical findings will present the empirical data acquired by doing interviews. This will be done by means of a narrative that focuses on Azure's scattered workforce and the role of employee and organizational identity. Throughout this section, we make use of the interviews that we have had with onsite and remote employees. By doing so, we will make sure that the reader can directly hear the employees' voices, by which the reader can use their own sense making before going into our sense making in the discussion chapter (Prasad, 2018).

Within this narrative, we will draw upon several themes that have proven themselves to be most important during the interviews with Azure's employees. While significantly broad questions have been asked to the interviewees, all interviews boiled down to a discussion on the topics indicated below. These themes will show the topics that mainly came up in the interviews while figuring out what motivates Azure's employees, whether they feel like they belong with the company, and whether they can identify themselves with Azure's workways. Hence, when going through the themes, the reader will, step by step, learn more about the different employees and how they perceive work life at Azure. Moreover, this information clarifies how they identify themselves within the organizational context.

When you are getting to know someone, the common thing to do is to ask for a brief **'introduction of the self'**: "who are you?". This question is usually reciprocated with any sentence starting with the word "I" - that is exactly where the clarification towards Azure's employees' identity starts. While learning more about the employees and delving deeper in their motivation for their job, it becomes clear that the 3D industry attracts individuals who have **'a hobby that becomes a job'**. When touching on topics around the company culture, collective behavior and sense of belonging at Azure, employees state that they have **'colleagues who feel like family'**, which partly is a result of **'the core of connectivity'** at the company. When it comes to Azure's common goals, employees share that they strive to **'be the best in the industry'**. However, being the best may take its toll and requires a hard-working mentality in combination with flexibility. While flexibility sounds all positive, the interviews with the employees showed the **'two sides of flexibility'** at the company. Touching on this same topic of flexibility, the company's ideal to **'work with anyone, from anywhere'** does not go

unnoticed for the employees and poses to be a very present factor in their day to day working lives.

These themes can be placed under the overarching topics of employee identity, company culture, and remote working. Within these topics, the reader will not only notice a difference in perception between onsite and remote employees, but also amongst the employees that are part of the same group.

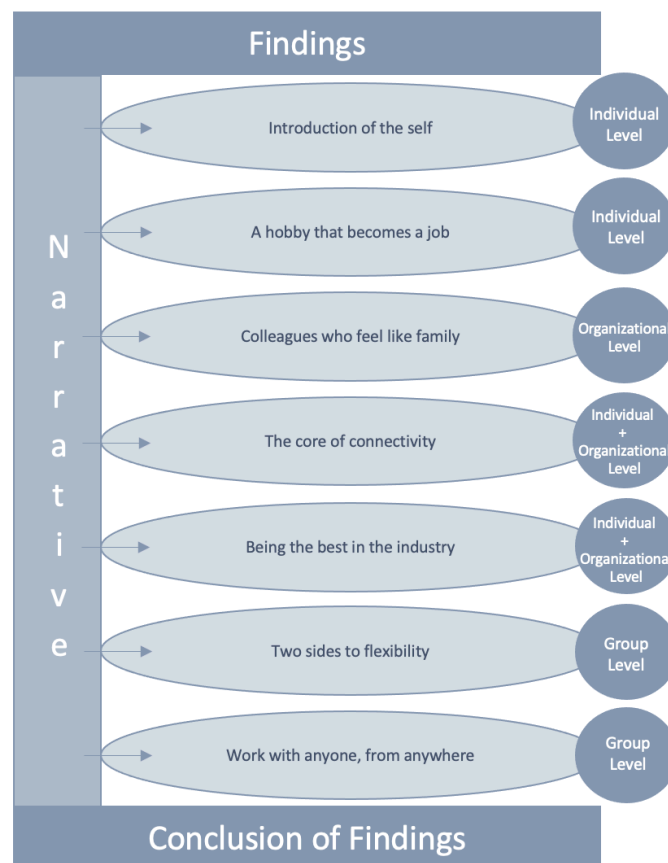


Fig. 4: Structure of Findings narrative

4.2.1 Introduction of the self at Azure

At the start of the conversation, the employees were asked to introduce themselves. The onsite employee Isabelle answered the question by mentioning her role within the company, and explaining more about her tasks and what this job entails exactly. Since the company has grown a lot, new departments have been set up, of which one is the sales department. As a new and only team member of the sales department, Isabelle explains some of the challenges she has come across in her position.

“I joined Azure in September, so I've been here for a bit over half a year, I think six or seven months. I work as a [sales] manager, which is a very new department and position in the company, which means that nothing was really established when I came in. No processes, no [sales] approach. My role was to start setting it all up from the ground [...]. So I work with all four verticals at the same time, which means I report directly to all the vertical leads simultaneously.” - Isabelle

Multiple remote employees also mention their function within the company in addition to some further information on what this entails. There is only one remote employee who specifically mentions their location while introducing themselves.

“I'm from [Spain], but I live in [Milan], in [Italy]. And yeah, this is the tenth year that I'm living in [Spain]. I grew up in [Spain], then I used to live in Australia for a while, and then I moved here. I used to work as a photographer and 3D artist and eventually I started to manage a small team of 3D artists in my old job, more than six months ago now. I started my new job here at Azure as project manager.” - Juan

Most onsite employees mentioned their length of their employment, which was mostly not longer than one year. Where one might assume this would cause challenges to stay connected with new colleagues, Max states that there have not been major sudden changes in his team, making it easier to get acquainted with every new colleague.

“Even though the company has grown massively, I think it's helped that it's mostly been the same people the entire time that I've been here. And in terms of the growth of the team I'm in, it hasn't felt really abrupt at a certain point. So there's always new people who have started, but it's been like a gentle introduction. It hasn't been 20 new team members all of a sudden, with who you would have to find a new way to work. I think that has been quite good.” - Max

Apart from direct work-related information, onsite and remote employees both mention a bit more about their personal background, naming past study and work experiences. Where some employees have gained their knowledge by means of self-study, other employees have gained university degrees to validate their skills.

“I did my bachelor's in [Italy], and I studied product development. Then I did my masters in textile products and clothing technology in [Zürich], in [Switzerland], and then I ... ended up here at Azure.” – Valeria

Almost half of the onsite employees interviewed mention their working location during the introduction. However, further on in the conversation, almost all the onsite employees mention their remote colleagues, without specifically being asked about it.

“.... I always thought I'd like to see people face-to-face; I think you can form a good connection there. But actually working here, maybe my views changed a bit. There's people I work with, remotely, who I've never met who I feel I have a really good working relationship with. Almost on a personal level as well, we can get to know them through working with them. But then, there are people onsite who I see, who will drop you a message, but then when they see you face-to-face, they say almost nothing. So I think my views here have actually changed.” - Sam

In fact, there is only one onsite employee who does not mention remote working out of their own volition, but only once directly being asked about it during the interview. This may suggest that almost all onsite employees feel an impact of partially remote teams in their daily working life - at least important enough to specifically mention it while answering questions related to Azure's culture, or their own motivation and job satisfaction for their role within the company. The same is true for Juan and his remote colleagues - most remote employees start to introduce their remote position without specifically being questioned about it.

“I think the thing that most people are interested in is that [my job] is fully remote. That's like a “Whoa, how awesome!” type of thing. It definitely is a nice thing. I don't want to think about how I used to have to go to work every day. Spend probably an hour and a half traveling. I don't miss that. I do miss office life, but I'm very lucky that I have this agreement that I will come into the office every few weeks or something, to see people in person and get a bit of that office-feeling again.” – Joseph

To conclude, there are similarities and differences to be found between the onsite and remote employees when introducing themselves. An overview of the most prominent answers given are shown in the section summary table below.

<i>Section summary: Introduction of the self</i>		
Criteria	Onsite	Remote
<i>Task-related</i>	Introduction of the self is task related	
<i>Job-related</i>	Introduction of the self is job related	Introduction of the self is job related
<i>Background-related</i>	Introduction of the self is about educational background	Introduction of the self is about educational background
<i>Location-related</i>		Introduction of the self does mostly not include remote working location
<i>Tenure-related</i>	Employee tenure is mostly < one year	

4.2.2 A hobby that becomes a job

After the introduction of the self, we delved deeper into the topic of motivation for the job. Motivation as a theme within the findings chapter, showcases the variety in motivational factors that employees at Azure feel. The biggest motivational factor for **onsite employees** is the growing phase that the company is in. As the company is still growing, it creates an opportunity to have an impact and to contribute and improve the further development, according to onsite employees.

“I think the job is interesting, to start something from zero that didn't exist before. I feel like I can have an impact. It's definitely a big challenge to do that, but it's an exciting challenge. When I joined Azure, my hope was to get some more management experience in the future, since it's such a new department I'm working for. This seemed possible within Azure since it's such a fast-growing company.” - Isabelle

The development of the company increases learning opportunities and enhances the gain of experiences, while simultaneously creating “an exciting challenge”, as mentioned by Valeria. Another motivational factor is created by the alignment of passion between personal and work life. While this ranges from creating content, to opportunities of working with internationally renowned brands that employees feel passionate about, it suggests motivation as an intrinsic value for employees at Azure.

“I just want to stay in the C[omputer] G[raphics] industry because that's really my passion, and I really enjoy working on the different images, and seeing all the new products that are being developed for these big brands. Also in my private life this is what I really like to do, I do research and stuff, just to see what's on the market right now.” - Valeria

Furthermore, it also becomes evident that people and culture within Azure contribute to motivation for onsite employees.

“I get motivated by my colleagues, when we work together on projects, we set our goals and we also celebrate once we reach them. Our office atmosphere is very welcoming, it helps you to remember why you are waking up so early when you come to the office to many ‘good mornings’” - Robert

All **remote employees** that were interviewed could pinpoint their main motivators for working with Azure; the general sense of eagerness and motivation shown amongst the remote employees may suggest a baseline satisfaction and sense of belonging within Azure. Where most remote interviewees mentioned more intrinsic motivators, others indicated that extrinsic, work-related motivators increased motivation for their job.

Looking at the internal motivators, some interviewees mentioned that their hobby became their job, and their role within the company was a perfect way for their two worlds to come together.

“On the personal side, [...] working as a 3D artist is something I've always wanted to do. I have always been into cars, motorcycles, but also into 3D design. This is basically my two worlds coming together. My job is my hobby. I think if my job would not be something I personally like I would have a very hard time waking up and getting started. I also love being around people with different professions,” - Will

Besides, others mention that their main motivation for the role lies in their personal goal to “improve their skill set” and to “contribute to [their] personal growth as an artist”. Other interviewees mention their desire to “keep stuff organized”, “see something I've worked on” and “just want to do a good job” as reasons for their internal motivation to perform their job at Azure.

“[My main motivation for this job is] a balance of both contributing to the growth of the company and as well as contributing to my personal growth as an artist and that blends well with my day to day work at Azure. [My personal goals are] actually mostly involving my skill set. It's like improving my skill set day after day, month after month. And yeah, so far since I started in Azure. That hasn't changed a bit. I've been improving day by day.” – Ava

Lastly, other remote employees mention that “connecting to people on a daily basis” motivates them to do their job, and this is the main reason that they love what they’re doing.

“I would say connection to people [motivates me to do my job], but it doesn't sound true because I'm working remotely. So it's really, really weird, but I have so many calls and so many different topics to discuss, connecting to people and resolving problems that we are facing daily. It's something that's motivating me and it's something that I really like.” - Juan

When looking at the external motivators that indicate a sense of belonging within the company, the main factor that has been mentioned by remote employees was the ability to contribute to projects that the company creates. For example, Daniel mentions that they are happy to contribute to new projects, and that the clients they work for are part of the reason why they are working for Azure.

“To be honest, I love what I'm doing ... I really enjoy the clients that I am working with, and my colleagues and family know about that. I'm just really happy that I'm contributing to these projects and new products for the upcoming years.” – Juan

Lastly, Danika, another remote employee, states that they are motivated by the fact that they can brag about their job at Azure.

“In the end, my job is something I can brag about, because Azure is the biggest 3D company that is creating content for the specific industry I work in. My job is something to be proud of and yes, you should be of course.” – Danika

From the empirical data within this section of the findings chapter, employees at Azure, either remote or onsite, all feel motivated to work for the company. Where onsite employees mention similar motivational factors, remote employees are more diverse in their answers. A summary of the most prominent motivational factors can be seen in the table below.

<i>Section summary: A hobby that becomes a job</i>		
<i>Criteria</i>	Onsite	Remote
<i>Similarity in motivational factors</i>	Similar for all employees <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Growing company, having an impact and contribute to development, increased learning opportunities - Alignment of passion between personal and work life - People and organizational culture 	Different per individual <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Hobby and job combined - Personal development - Daily connection to people - Contribute to the company's projects - Working with exciting company clients

4.2.3 Colleagues who feel like family

The previous section showed different intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors for employees to work at Azure, and both onsite and remote employees mentioned aspects relation to their colleagues and organizational culture. Therefore, these topics are investigated in this section. Looking further at organizational culture at Azure from the point of view of **onsite employees**, it becomes evident that there is a positive working atmosphere in which employees are genuinely passionate about their work.

“I feel that people are very interested in what they do, because we have these four verticals. Each of the verticals hires project managers and artists that are already interested in the industry they will be working in. So, they already have a background in this field. That makes them very motivated to work on their projects, and very passionate. So it's not some random design that you're working on for something, but you're really working for things that you care about, and that really shows - people really talk a lot about their projects. They really want to be involved and produce good work.” - Isabelle

However, when it comes to the atmosphere and culture experienced at the office, opinions differ. Some employees mention that they do not feel too connected when working from the office, due to a lack of (team) members working from the office.

“I don't know about connectedness and social culture... I don't feel too much of it. That might relate to the fact that I mostly work alone. So yeah, people are nice and friendly, but it's not necessarily a big unity and some strong sense of connectedness as a whole.”

- Isabelle

“Within the office it's difficult to be honest, because [...] there's usually not that many people here. So the actual atmosphere you get from the office is quite different whereas on calls with people, I think there's a real energy and a lot of people are keen to do well at the job.” - Sam

Most other onsite employees do not share this opinion. They state that they like the atmosphere at the office, they feel connected, and working from the office gives them energy.

“I love our office and our people. It really gives me the energy” - Karel

“The vibe is really good. Like, people are really enjoying what they're doing.” - Valeria

According to some, the environment at the office is nice, open and very friendly. The atmosphere at the office is described as collaborative.

“I think it's a very nice working environment. Overall, I think it's super open and very friendly. The communication is great. I really do like the fact that it's a very collaborative environment, it's all about hard work, but also about doing that hard work together.” - Robert

As seen above, the ‘hard working mentality’ is described in a rather positive light. Other onsite employees, however, shine a different light on the same matter.

“People work very hard, which causes people to burn out, or simply not be happy or satisfied with their job. I notice that this is only dealt with after the mess is done;

someone comes along and is like 'oh yea, they burned out'. At that point, everyone is very understanding and very nice and polite, but we don't do stuff to prevent that."

- Cristina

When analyzing the perception of Azure's company culture from the viewpoint of **remote employees**, the employees struggled to come up with an answer initially. Over half of the employees mentioned that company culture can only be felt when physically at the office. The answers that were given eventually, all related to the times that they have visited the office rather than the company culture they felt when working in their usual home office. This may suggest that a physical office space, in combination with meeting colleagues in person, is most relevant when describing a company's culture.

"In the office, there is this space where you can actually grab a cup of coffee and speak about different topics. This gives you the possibility to speak with someone and learn new things about this person that are not just work related." - Sofia

Similarly to the onsite employees, the remote employees also mention the 'getting stuff done' mentality as a part of Azure's culture.

"I think we make stuff work. So from a project perspective, we're very open to any kind of briefs that come in. And then we like to have this culture of being up for it, and giving something a try. So I think that's where I'm getting that from - we often have projects with crazy deadlines, but we make it work. So in that way, everyone's a bit of a problem solver." - Joseph

While the initial difficulty formulating a description of Azure's company culture may suggest a sense of disconnection for the remote employees, the eventual positive association with Azure's culture does show a certain job satisfaction and belonging with Azure and its people.

"How we are all managing to work with each other and talk to each other, being friendly and almost like a family ... I really feel like it's amazing." - Juan

"For an online working environment like we have, it's very conducive. It's very pleasant to work with." - Ava

The section summary below provides an overview of the different perceptions that onsite and remote colleagues have on Azure’s organizational culture. While mainly positive, there are some critical factors to consider.

<i>Section summary: Colleagues who feel like family</i>		
Criteria	Onsite	Remote
<i>Clarity on company culture</i>	Easy to come up with a description of the company’s culture: overall positive working atmosphere	Hard to come up with a description of the company culture
<i>Feeling of company culture at the office</i>	Energy from working at the office Office environment is nice, open, friendly, and collaborative	Half of the employees think that company culture can only be felt when working at the office
<i>Mentality</i>	Hard working mentality, positive and negative aspects	Problem-solving company culture
<i>(Dis)connectedness</i>	Mentioned by a minority: disconnectedness due to lack of team members working from the office	Connecting with each other like family

4.2.4 The core of connectivity

When zooming into the topic of organizational culture, it is seen that employees at Azure touch on factors such as a sense of belonging within the company, and collective behavior between colleagues. Looking at the empirical data, these two topics proved to be important topics during the interviews with **onsite employees**. It is often mentioned that employees enjoy coffee breaks and lunch together, in addition to going out for drinks and dinner after work. According to some, this builds deeper connections with colleagues and results in getting energy and motivation from colleagues in the office. It is mentioned that this strong social interaction creates a warm and welcoming atmosphere.

“The colleagues that I have in the office, we see each other once a week at least. We eventually go out for drinks and it's all pretty nice. I really liked the environment and the things that we're talking about. There are so many people with different experiences from different cultures in the company. It's such a warm and welcoming atmosphere... That also makes me feel like I belong here.” - Cristina

According to some employees, the closeness within the team is accelerated as everyone in their team is rather involved. Moreover, the fact that teams consist of people from different cultural backgrounds and nationalities also creates a more inclusive atmosphere, in which people feel like they belong.

“This place is open to different cultures and different backgrounds, to people who are in the office or people who are not in the office. This possibility of me being one month in my home country, and still being able to work with the company is something that also appeals to me This opportunity attracts so many people from so many different cultures and countries, it’s amazing. It’s like a melting pot where everyone is welcome, and that makes me feel like I belong.” - Robert

However, when speaking of belonging with the company and collective behavior, other onsite employees feel less involved. These employees state that the rapid growth of Azure lead to new roles being established that are only broadly defined, hence, vague, and yet to be intertwined with an actual team. They don’t always feel connected with the company, as their role is sometimes misunderstood or underestimated.

“I don't feel I have much of a sense of belonging. I think because of the turnover in the team previously, we're not really used to each other yet. Sometimes I also feel like my role isn't too valuable yet... I feel like I'm replaceable.” - Sam

Moreover, some onsite employees feel disconnected because of colleagues leaving their department, pressure from top-management, and other colleagues’ wrong perception of the department’s efforts. The high turnover in their team leaves them to feel “not too connected”, as it is difficult to build relationships with people that are only in your team for a short period of time. Besides, high work pressure results in stress, which may grow a seed of dissatisfaction in the long run. In fact, only one onsite employee mentioned that they had never felt disconnected from the company before. All in all, the disconnectedness described by onsite employees mainly results from work task-related matters, rather than the people within the company.

“I must admit, I kind of enjoy my role most because of the people in the company. My job itself is fine, I enjoy it from time to time, but the work pressure can be very intense. I sometimes don’t understand why we let it get to this point.” - Daniel

Contradicting the above-mentioned statements on disconnectedness, are the things that the onsite employees mention about the team spirit at Azure. Most employees describe their team’s way of working to be collaborative, whereby they are regularly asked for input and to give advice, which makes them feel like they are heard.

“I notice in our team meetings that everyone is free to talk and bring input which is nice, I feel that people are listened to.” - Will

Lastly, the hierarchical structure of the company has been mentioned frequently by onsite employees, in relation to ‘belonging’ to the company. The organizational structure of Azure is mainly described as flat, whereby everyone is approachable and generally easy to reach. Employees are treated on a human level, rather than ‘just employees’, and communication is very personal. This description is not only true on a team member-level, but also when looking at the relation between management and employees. Onsite employees describe that employees and managers value each other both ways, and lower-level employees get along well with their direct manager and higher management.

“I feel in a position where I deal with people in positions of power... I talk with the most senior people in the company, which yet gives me a sense of being in an important role, even though I’m not that senior. It’s nice how everyone is approachable in this company, and not very corporate ‘businessy’. It makes me feel valued.”- Sam

Leadership is seen as trustful and approachable, and the team structure is described as ‘a family’.

“The company is very good at organizing things and making sure that we're all connected not only internally, like team meetings, [...] but also with other things [...] like team building events and so on. That's always really nice. Yeah, I feel like overall, it does feel like a family sort of workplace and that's something that I really like.”

- Robert

Looking at the **remote employees**, different experiences around a sense of belonging are shared. While some employees state that they have never felt disconnected from the company on any occasion, about half of the remote employees do provide examples of moments they have felt disconnected from Azure. Only a few of these employees felt disconnected due to working remotely; other reasons were mainly linked to work tasks.

“I guess sometimes [I felt disconnected from the company]. We've been having quite a big finance conversation at the moment. And at the beginning of that, it did feel a bit like it was a kind of “just figure it out” situation. Whereas for me, I don't particularly feel like it's my job to figure out the finances.” - Joseph

“We've had more admin things to do a few months ago, and I didn't have time to connect with my artists. And I was really upset because for a week I wasn't able to connect with them.” - Juan

Even though some interviewees mention their work location as reason to periodically feel disconnected, the overall feeling on this specific topic does not indicate a strong connection between remote work and disconnection from the team and company.

Where onsite employees are not only positive about their connection with the team and company, all remote employees indicate that they feel connected with their colleagues and with the company. There are different reasons for this connection, and the interviews with remote employees suggest that online communication does not stand in the way of developing a sense of belonging with the company.

“I think that the Azure-core of connecting people and how we are all managing to work together and talk to each other and being friendly almost feels like a family. I really feel like it's amazing.” - Juan

When it comes to interpersonal connections, however, different experiences are shared. About half of the employees state they feel equally connected to their team and manager regardless of their online work environment, while the other half mention that they do not have too many personal connections with colleagues online.

“It's very different as soon as you move out of your direct team. So even within the department, it feels like the other teams are completely different. So again, I feel like there could be a bit more cohesion there. For the other departments, I have no idea what they're doing most of the time. So in short, yes... I just know about two or three people well, but it's difficult to get in touch with other people if you can't just run into them at the coffee machine.” - Joseph

Moreover, half of the remote employees mention personal connections they have created with their team members in person, when visiting the office, which carry on when going back to their remote home-office. One remote employee specifically states that they could not have built the same connection online as they have done when meeting colleagues in real life, and this bond with their team is not created online, but continues to exist online.

“If you're starting as a new person and you're fully remote... It's not really or for me, it doesn't really feel the same. Like you can't really build the same connection. You're not going to be like, “Hey, do you want to Zoom-beer?”, like... “No.” - Max

Looking at the cohesion in the remote teams, most remote employees describe a good atmosphere amongst colleagues, trust from management, no strict hierarchy within teams, and an overall family feeling within the company. These statements compare well to the earlier statements described by onsite employees. However, besides this initial positive association with Azure's cohesion, there is one remote employee who provides a few critical notes.

“I do wish that we celebrated our achievements a bit more at Azure. I feel like we definitely don't do that as much as we should like, even if it's just kind of patting people on the back and recognizing the achievements they've made. I think that's an area that Azure needs to do a lot better. This would really improve that team-spirit feeling that is missing at times.” - Joseph

To summarize, it is seen in the following table that the sense of belonging and collective behavior at Azure go hand in hand. Employees at Azure feel connected to the company due to the people they work with – either remote or onsite. However, there is a difference to be found between onsite and remote employees.

<i>Section summary: The core of connectivity</i>		
Criteria	Onsite	Remote
<i>Connection through office culture</i>	Employees enjoy coffee breaks and lunch together, resulting in a deeper personal connection, thus enhance energy and motivation from colleagues + Strong social interaction creates warm and welcoming atmosphere	Interpersonal connections are different remotely than onsite, but remote Employees get possibilities to visit the office – that’s where personal connections are built.
<i>Connection through collaboration</i>	Collaborative spirit	All remote employees feel connected with their colleagues
<i>Connection through inclusivity</i>	Diverse and inclusive teams due to remote colleagues	
<i>Connection through leadership style</i>	Trustful leadership, low power distances, in which employees are seen on a personal level	
<i>Disconnectedness</i>	Rapid growth excludes some roles, leading to decreased connectedness High work pressure results in dissatisfaction, disconnectedness, and employee turnover	Half of the remote employees felt disconnected before due to remote working location or work tasks Only weak relation between remote work and disconnection

4.2.5 Being the best in the industry

Collective behavior and belonging within the company, as discussed in the previous section, is often related to a common company goal – or company mission – and shared values amongst colleagues. Hence, further findings on organizational culture concern the mission and values of Azure. All **onsite employees** that were interviewed struggled to state the companies’ mission in their own words.

“I have no idea what the mission of the company is. So I couldn't even use a singular word that they have to spread.” - Cristina

Nevertheless, after giving it some thought, all onsite employees were able to state a mission connected to their department in particular. The answers that were mentioned ranged from broad statements such as “delivering top-quality work” and “present every product in the best way possible”, to more specific descriptions as presented below.

“To provide a streamlined or automated way to digitize or produce digital content in a much more efficient and accurate way, I would say. Finding a way to replicate and do content in a much quicker way, rather than having to spend so much time on doing photo shoots and so on.” - Robert

When the onsite employees were asked whether they felt connected to this mission, the answer was mostly ‘yes’.

The **remote employees**, on the other hand, were all able to easily come up with a comprehensive answer when being asked about Azure’s mission. However, like the onsite employees, the answers that were provided all related to the employees’ specific department rather than the company as a whole.

“That mission, at least in the automotive department, is super clear. We want to make the best 3D content for bikes and all other companies. At this moment, about more than 50% of bike companies are with us, and now we want to do the same with cars. So, we want to explore more companies that we can help, and of course to make more revenue.” - Juan

As for the onsite employees, the remote employees also indicated that they felt connected to Azure’s mission, due to an (indirect) impact on the company’s success.

*“The mission itself... maybe not [a direct impact] because I'm working on a client that is with us for a long, long time. But when it comes to that mission, I can say that I'm contributing ... I really like to make clients happy. And they are, so that works ... I had an impact in that because we created a lot of images in a really short time because of a pipeline change that I introduced. So yes, I really feel like I'm contributing to that.”
- Juan*

The company values, however, were more difficult to define for the remote interviewees. Half of the interviewees started their answer by saying that it was a tough question to answer, where the other half stated the opposite, starting their answer by saying that the values were clear to them. All remote employees followed that statement by eventually coming up with certain values that they felt within their specific team, which made the answers diverse, ranging from

“openness”, to “no hierarchy”, “celebrating its people” and “continuously answering new challenges”.

An overview of the most important answers provided by the onsite and remote employees can be found in the table below.

<i>Section summary: Being the best in the industry</i>		
Criteria	Onsite	Remote
<i>Understanding of company goal</i>	All employees struggled to name a common company goal	All employees easily came up with a common company goal
<i>Connectedness to company goal</i>	Although answers were diverse, employees felt connected to the common goals that they eventually came up with	The answers on the company’s common goal were similar, and employees felt connected to this goal. The goal mentioned mainly related to ‘being the best in the industry’.
<i>Understanding of company values</i>	Values were easy to come up with: open environment, personal communication, quality and commitment, ambition, flexibility to adapt	Values were harder to come up with and led to diverse answers: openness, no hierarchy, continuous new challenges

4.2.6 Two sides to flexibility

As touched upon in the previous section, flexibility and hard work are deemed to be important pillars within Azure. For **onsite employees** in particular, flexibility is a recurring value. Within the organizational culture, flexibility can be seen in adaptable working hours and schedules, and the opportunity to work remotely.

“We're pretty flexible in the team, which is nice when it comes to working from other places and countries, but also working from home or working from the office. But also on a daily basis, for example to finish later one day, but then start later the next. It really helps with my personal life as well, since I like to visit my family abroad, while not using all my holidays.” - Will

Moreover, teams are flexible in organizing themselves, regarding their own deadlines and working methods. Some employees mention that they feel trusted by their manager - trust in employees to get their work done, no matter their schedule or working location.

“There’s a lot of flexibility: working remotely, not working strict hours, there’s trust in employees to do their work. It’s never difficult to get a day off, request a holiday: if it’s possible it’s possible. Flexibility goes two ways though: if I have to work late, I do that without complaining.” - Karel

However, as described above, flexibility goes two ways and can also lead to long working hours in which employees need to be flexible towards management. The ability to think and work in a flexible manner is required to work at a fast-growing company like Azure, since many changes occur and employees need to be able to adapt and rethink quickly. This also requires management to pose tight deadlines, as there is pressure to finish projects on time to please clients. According to some employees, this results in a high workload and pressure.

“It is quite a lot sometimes in terms of workload, which means that I’m sometimes working quite late as well. [...] We have quite a lot of projects which have super tight timelines. There’s no wiggle room in those timelines and things can get very intense and very stressful. Because, in the end, [...] you have to make sure that you deliver on time and that the client is happy.” - Valeria

While onsite employees are rather fond of their remote working options, the **remote employees** do not mention flexibility in a positive light when talking about their remote working position. When discussing the flexible work hours, remote employees mainly focus on the downsides, such as occasional overtime and stress.

“The workload is a lot sometimes, and when it was really bad, I was working about 60 hours a week. That was in the beginning of my job here, and now it’s a lot better. I did get some free days in return in the end, but not always, it’s part of the job as well I guess.” - Juan

The summary section below shows the difference in view on remote working at Azure. Where the initial opinion may be positive, there are two sides to the coin of flexibility.

<i>Section summary: Two sides to flexibility</i>		
<i>Criteria</i>	<i>Onsite</i>	<i>Remote</i>
<i>Upsides to flexibility</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Adaptable working hours and schedules - Opportunity to work remotely - Flexible teamwork: own deadlines - Trust of management to get work done - Ability to think flexibly in a fast growing company 	
<i>Downsides to flexibility</i>	Long working hours and tight deadlines resulting into stress	Long working hours and tight deadlines resulting into stress

4.2.7 Work with anyone, from anywhere

As seen in the previous section, remote working is a result of Azure’s flexibility towards working location and working hours. Flexibility is a necessity, as the company’s aim is to be able to work with anyone, from anywhere. Isabelle, an **onsite employee**, agrees with this goal as *“there’s no way you can’t have a remote company in 2024”*. While this statement showcases a general acceptance of remote working policies by onsite employees, there is a mix of positive and negative aspects mentioned by onsite employees when it comes to their partially remote teams.

Almost all onsite employees state that Azure is very supportive when it comes to the possibility to work fully or partially remote.

“Even for those that are working remotely, I feel like it just works well. And professionally, I think that we take all the necessary [steps. For example,] support is there as well from ... HR [and] also [from] management perspective, whenever it's needed. There's always sort of like a lending hand.” - Robert

Besides online support, Azure also supports bringing remote employees into the offices from abroad to partake in specific events. By doing so, onsite and remote employees can get to know each other on a personal level too.

“Being in office is that you're able to have that connection ... and then you're able to build a stronger bond with those people. So that's something that's really nice. And that's also something that Azure does ... once in a while. They do support and they also bring people in that work from abroad. They come here for like a week or two and that's really nice because then you do build a different type of bond.” - Robert

Although it feels better for some employees to be around people in an office, one onsite employee describes a change in their mindset and work approach.

“I always thought I do like to see people face to face, I think you can form a good connection there. But actually working here, maybe my views changed a bit. There's people I work with, remotely, who I've never met who I feel I have a really good working relationship with. And almost on a personal level as well, we can get to know them through working with them ... I'm usually someone who likes to come and be around people, but I think now I can form relationships with anyone by any means ... I think now I've learned better.” - Sam

Another frequently mentioned positive factor in relation to remote working, is productivity.

“I am a big supporter of remote working because I think it does work ... If I'm working from home, I actually find myself sometimes even a little bit more productive. I do think that having that connection, and that interaction with your colleagues is important, but it doesn't necessarily have to be in person.” - Robert

However, besides all the positive associations with remote working, almost all onsite employees also notice a difference between onsite and remote employees. This difference mainly refers to a difference in connection and relationship between the two groups. The main reason mentioned is the atmosphere at the office that remote employees miss out on. When at the office, employees take (coffee) breaks and lunch together, which provides an opportunity to build stronger connections with colleagues when talking about non-work-related matters.

“[With remote workers], the only times that we sync is because of work. And then usually we don't want to waste too much time [at] our meetings to talk about personal stuff or to talk about other things. So, I love the remote working function... [But with]

the people that are here and we see each other in the office ... there's some sort of, it's not intimacy, but like there's some of the relationship things there that you only have when people are doing onsite work. So I would say onsite work is just a plus for oneself.” - Cristina

The contact with remote employees is mostly in short chats online, when writing short messages on Teams. Some onsite employees mention that they find it hard to make a personal connection that way, as it is hard to find out how remote employees are doing. Moreover, there seems to be no time to waste during online meetings to talk about personal matters. This lack of personal interaction online makes it harder to build interpersonal connections with fully remote colleagues, as indicated by half of the onsite interviewees.

“From a professional maybe it's not needed, but for building the personal relationships ... you do feel a much bigger connection if you're able to be in the office and come and meet the people and also spend time in the building because it's very easy to get isolated [from] what your team is doing, versus being there in person and then also seeing what other verticals for other brands are doing and how they're working.” - Valeria

Lastly, according to an onsite employee, remote employees are not able to experience and observe intradepartmental communication, which can help to understand how other teams approach certain situations. It would increase efficiency to be able to discuss similar struggles.

“Cross communication can also be very important because maybe different teams are doing things in a better way that are not necessarily being done in yours... There's many things that are not directly transferred or can be used by other teams, but a specific way or an approach to a certain thing can definitely be used in a different team.” - Isabelle

Similar to onsite employees, **remote employees** also express a mix of positive and negative statements when being asked about their remote position. The main positive factors that were mentioned had to do with the personal lives of the remote employees and therefore relate to work-life balance.

“I’m actually really happy that I got this opportunity to work from home. I mean, because of this, no relocation was needed anymore. We were able to stay at home, in our home country, which is our preferred place to live. Just the job market was not favorable so this is why. And also, I would say, I think it gives me so much flexibility to schedule my own day.” - Danika

Moreover, almost all remote employees specifically mentioned that they did not notice any difference in connection between onsite employees and remote employees. The main reasons mentioned are the online team meetings - a moment during which the whole team, both onsite and remote employees, come together to discuss necessary work-related matters.

“I don’t really feel disconnected from the team or company to be honest. I think because it’s so kind of full on in terms of communication, both at the office and remotely, I’m always speaking to someone and it doesn’t ever feel like, okay, I’m all alone here. I feel like I know my colleagues, and yes, most chats are work related but it’s also more personal conversations with some people.” - Max

Another significant benefit of remote working that has been mentioned by over half of the remote interviewees, is productivity.

“The difference is big, because I really like to work remotely and I like my space, ... when I’m locked in my office, it’s quiet, and I can focus on everything and if someone has a problem, then he is calling but ... I’m not distracted, which is to be honest key for me. ... In [the] office sometimes someone is running by [just to ask] ‘hey what’s up.’ ... That’s really great, but it makes it harder for me to concentrate.” - Juan

However, some interviewees also connected downsides to their remote position. As mentioned previously, the remote employees struggled to describe the company culture at Azure. Half of the interviewees mentioned that it’s hard to feel a certain company culture when not being physically at the office. The company-culture examples that did follow, solely related to the times that they had visited the office.

“Because I’m [working] remotely [feeling the culture] is a bit different, I guess. Culturally, every time that I went to the office, ... I was invited there, and I stayed there

for a week. I was there for the Christmas party. Although ... there is a very good atmosphere and there is a lot of effort to try to connect as much as possible, [for] the people that are working ... remotely, that is of course a bit more difficult in terms of feeling culture or atmosphere.” - Sofia

Besides, other remote employees mention that they have never seen their colleagues in real life and that they do not feel a very personal bond with them. Lastly, there are some practical factors that contribute to the downsides of remote working, such as difficult communication due to working in different time zones and technical issues that make it hard to connect with colleagues.

From this section, it becomes clear that there are positive and negative connotations to Azure's remote working methods. A summary of these different viewpoints can be seen in the section summary table below.

<i>Section summary: Work with anyone, from anywhere</i>		
<i>Criteria</i>	<i>Onsite</i>	<i>Remote</i>
<i>Variation in feelings towards remote working</i>	Mix of positive and negative aspects to remote working	Mix of positive and negative aspects to remote working
<i>Positive aspects of remote working</i>	There is support from HR & management to work remotely, remote employees can join onsite events, and increased productivity when working from home	Work life balance, strong personal bond with colleagues due to online meetings, increased productivity when working from home
<i>Downsides to remote working</i>	Difference in forming interpersonal connections with remote colleagues as there's no time for chitchat in online meetings, and remote employees miss out on atmosphere at the office (coffee / lunch breaks)	Hard to feel the company culture when not working from the office, difference in forming interpersonal connections

4.3 Chapter Summary

Within the table below, we aim to provide a comprehensive overview of the empirical findings. The table shows the themes that proved themselves to be most essential and important in relation to Azure’s employees’ identity. The themes below are organized by individual, organizational, and group level. Altogether, by creating an overview of the themes in this table, we depict the dimensions that individuals within the organization rely on when shaping their identities in an organizational context. These findings will be further analyzed in the discussion chapter, by comparing our findings to existing literature.

<i>Level</i>	<i>Theme</i>	<i>Onsite employees</i>	<i>Remote employees</i>
<i>Individual</i>	Introduction of the self	Introduce by means of role, tasks, educational background, and tenure at Azure. No mention of working location.	Introduce by means of role and educational background. One person mentions remote working location.
	A hobby that becomes a job (motivation)	Similar motivational factors are mentioned: growing company, alignment of personal and professional passion, people and culture at Azure	Different motivational factors are mentioned: hobby and job combined, personal development, exciting clients and projects, connection to colleagues.
	The core of connectivity (belonging)	Joint activity results in interpersonal connections between colleagues, strong social interaction creates a warm and welcoming atmosphere, collaborative environment, trustful leadership, employees feel seen on a personal level. On the other hand: rapid company growth causes disconnectedness at times, and high work pressure results in dissatisfaction.	Half of the employees felt disconnected before, either due to working location or work tasks. All remote employees feel connected with their colleagues due to frequent online communication. Interpersonal connections are different from onsite employees, but not often experienced in a negative way. There’s no strong connection between remote work and dissatisfaction.
	Being the best in the industry (common goal)	All employees struggled to name the company’s common goal, but once a team-goal was mentioned, the employees did feel connected to that goal. Company values were easy to come up with: open environment, personal communication, quality and commitment, ambition, flexibility to adapt.	Everyone could easily come up with the company’s common goal and felt connected to this common goal: being the best in the industry. Company values were harder to come up with and resulted in diverse answers: openness, no hierarchy, continuous new challenges.
<i>Organizational</i>	Colleagues who feel like family (culture)	Easy to describe company culture: positive working atmosphere that gives energy. Office environment is nice, open, friendly, collaborative. Hard working mentality. Minority mentions disconnectedness due to lack of colleagues at the office.	Hard to describe company culture because of remote position: can only truly be felt when working from the office. After some thought, Azure’s culture is described as problem-solving, and like a family.
	The core of connectivity (belonging)	See above.	See above.
	Being the best in the industry (mission)	See above.	See above.
<i>Group</i>	Two sides of flexibility (flexibility)	Mainly positives: adaptable working hours, working remotely, flexible teamwork, flexible thinking in fast growing company. Downsides: long working hours and tight deadlines.	Mainly downsides: flexible remote working hours cause occasional overtime and therefore stress.
	Work with anyone, from anywhere (remote working)	Positives: company support to work remotely, increased productivity, remote employees can join onsite events. Downsides: less interpersonal connections, remote employees missing out on the office atmosphere.	Positives: work life balance, connection to colleagues still there due to frequent online communication, increased productivity. Downsides: hard to experience the company culture, difference in forming interpersonal connections.

5. Discussion

This discussion chapter will showcase the empirical findings in the light of the existing literature, aiming to analyze the findings in a wider, theoretical context. With this discussion, we aim to make sense of the findings in the previous chapter, giving meaning to the different employee identities and what this means in the context of Azure. We will do so by continuously searching for, what we call, the *push* and *pull* factors: thus, what factors *push* the identification of onsite and remote employees *away* from Azure, and what factors *pull* the identification of onsite and remote employees *towards* Azure? Moreover, we have identified *unique push or pull factors*. These unique factors show which factors only consist among a specific group, being onsite or remote employees. By doing so, we can provide a comprehensive answer to the main research question.

What factors affect identification of onsite and remote employees in contemporary organizations on an individual, organizational, and group level?

Following the narrative of the findings chapter, this chapter starts by highlighting the organizational context of Azure through the lens of existing literature regarding organizational change and remote working. The context poses to be of high importance to understand the identity developments in contemporary organizations on an **individual** level, **group** level, and **organizational** level. This chapter will be structured by means of these levels. Within these sections, three broader themes as indicated in the empirical findings – employee identity, organizational culture, and remote working – will be discussed while taking the interpretive approach of this study into consideration. These three broader themes are divided into sections equal to the sections of the findings chapter.

5.1 Growth and Internationalization at Azure

According to the findings, Azure has been on a strong growth phase in the past three to four years. This also implies that the company is facing ongoing change. According to Tan et al. (2007), the growth phase of an organization demands organizational change, which can pose a

challenge for company leaders. Specifically for organizations in the developing phase, beyond the startup phase, like Azure, this is of importance. Van Dijk and Van Dick (2009) suggest that during periods of organizational change, resistance commonly arises. They argue that this resistance is a product of social interaction, constructed and defined within the organization. Additionally, they propose that organizational change can threaten an employee's sense of identity tied to their work, leading to resistance as a means of preserving self-esteem. Looking at Azure, resistance is not a common topic within the findings. Yet, it can be seen that the growing phase that the company is in, poses the need to work quickly in a highly competitive environment. This does not only increase pressure for leadership, but also results in time pressure and overtime for many onsite and remote employees. Hence, this **pressure and overtime because of organizational growth** is seen as a factor that may push employees away from the company in their identification process.

An additional change within Azure was initiated during the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic in 2020 initiated a hiring freeze at Azure at first, as many companies worldwide experienced a time of uncertainty. Worldwide, an increasing number of employees needed to adapt to remote work because of government regulations to cope with the pandemic (Felstead, 2022). Azure quickly adapted to the changing circumstances, switching their recruitment strategy and building on their service's strength of not needing any face-to-face contact to get the best results. Therefore, remote employees were recruited that were able to work from anywhere in the world. Today, by 2024, around 55% of employees at Azure work remotely. According to McPhail et al. (2023), as the pandemic eased, organizations faced challenges from widespread remote work, including instances of employees "quiet quitting", which is a result of the belief that work shouldn't dominate your personal life (Aydin, 2022). Yet, "quiet quitting" cannot be seen within Azure. Instead, the findings show the opposite: employees at Azure are rather happy and satisfied working there, either remotely or onsite, while still always having the option of working remotely. Therefore, **the option to work remotely** is commonly seen as a factor that pulls onsite employees towards identifying with the company.

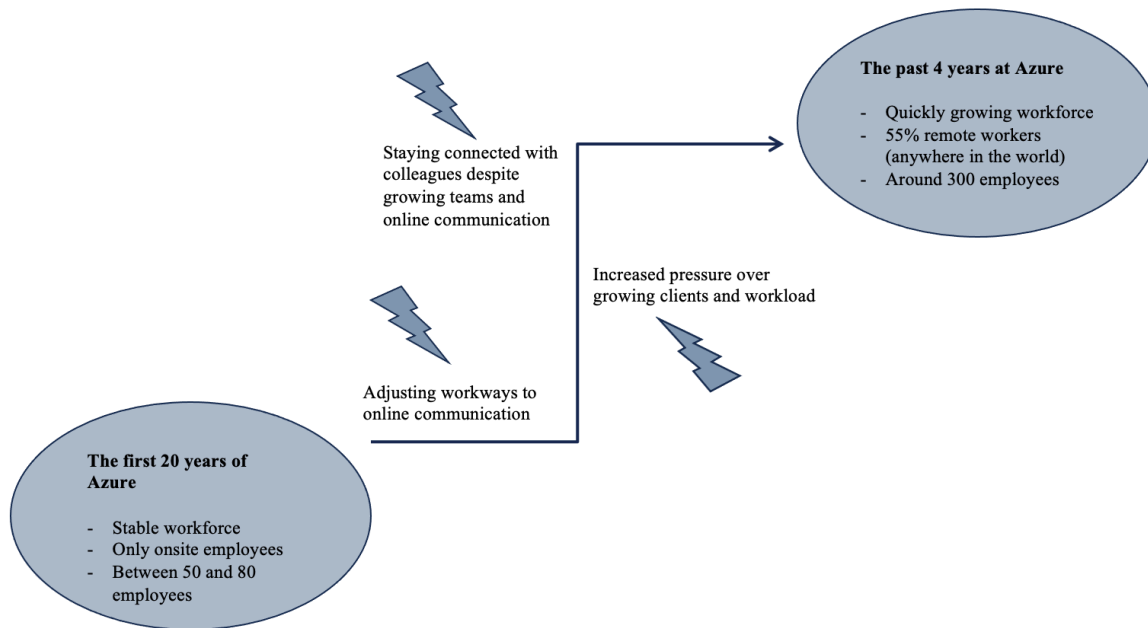


Fig. 5: Growth and challenges at Azure

5.2 Individual Level – Differences in remote and onsite employee identification

Looking at the 25-year existence of the company, remote working has only emerged very recently, in the last three to four years. On an individual level, this means that employees had to adjust their way of communicating with colleagues, in addition to dealing with changed working processes. Moreover, they suddenly belonged to a new social group: onsite or remote employees. Within this section, we explore the differences in **employee identity** between remote and onsite employees, while comparing the findings of the previous chapter with existing literature.

5.2.1 Introduction of the self

To find out about an individual's 'identity', thus the 'self', the question "Who are you?" should be asked (Stryker & Serpe, 1982, cited in Desrochers, 2004, p. 61). This question was a part of the interview guide for the interviewees at Azure. All interviewees immediately responded to the question with a role- and task-related answer, mentioning their job title describing their tasks. Research suggests that people's identities are closely tied to their work, with a majority of adults spending most of their waking hours on their jobs (Judge et al., 2020), underscoring the significance of employment in shaping individual identity. This indicates that the interviewees' work-related response to their identity is not uncommon. When further delving

into identity, it shows that identity is defined as “a set of meanings attached to roles individuals occupy in the social structure” (Stryker, 1980, 2002; cited in Stets & Serpe, 2013, p.34). Thus, for the interviewees, no matter remote or onsite, their job makes part of their identity fit into the social structure. The fact that the onsite and remote employees’ **job fits within their social structure**, pulls the onsite and remote employees towards identification with Azure. Yet, a majority of onsite employees introduce themselves with their length of employment, which is in all cases not longer than one year. While this might indicate the growth of the company, it provides a further context on their employee identity, seeing it as a crucial point when using their job as an introduction to their self. This might be because individuals create meanings due to continuous reflection on themselves with diverse roles, social contexts, or personal identities (Burke & Stets, 2009; cited in Stets & Serpe, 2013). An individual's identity formation involves an ongoing interaction between societal and personal constructs. Social constructs, such as organizational and professional norms that prescribe appropriate role behavior, frequently lead individuals to adhere to these expectations (Ybema et al., 2009).

The self is seen as complex, consisting of interrelated and autonomous elements that can both reinforce and occasionally oppose each other (Mead, 1934; cited in Stryker & Burke, 2000). It becomes interesting when analyzing the interviewees' introduction to their self, looking at their working locations they mentioned. While only a minority of remote employees mention their remote location, half of onsite employees mention their working location. Hence, **the working location** for onsite employees can be seen as a pulling factor towards identification with the company. While for remote employees their social group related to work might seem further away or is not established, for onsite employees their working location is part of their job, seeing their colleagues daily. This aligns James’ (1890, cited in Stryker & Burke, 2000, p.286) theory, that individuals possess multiple identities aligned with the different social groups they interact with. Thus, in relation to working location, the employee identity of onsite employees might be directly linked to their colleague social group. In other words, **the social side of the job** pulls onsite employees towards identification with the company. Additionally, it is crucial to note the concept of identity salience hierarchy (Stryker, 1987). Identity salience refers to the likelihood of a particular identity being activated in various situations (Stets & Serpe, 2013). Identities that are more salient are those with a higher probability of being expressed through verbal or behavioral actions in different contexts. Therefore, taking into consideration that the interview was held with an introduction to the topic of researching for the interviewees company, the interviewees might bring their Azure-identity, including their title, tasks, and

work location forward. Only a minority introduce their self in relation to a more personal background, like their education or home situation.

5.2.2 A hobby that becomes a job

Employee identity in an organization involves finding ways to fit in an organization, displaying identities that are acceptable to colleagues, while gaining flexibility, independence, and influence within the company (Fenwick, 2010). Identifying and acknowledging the personal employee identity is crucial to reach job satisfaction and fulfillment (Driver, 2017). Hence, motivation is key in shaping an employee's identity, serving as both a means of self-expression and a tool for achieving goals (Johnson et al., 2010). Within the interviews, a diverse range of motivational factors have been found. In the two-factor theory, intrinsic factors such as the nature of the work, responsibility, growth opportunities, and recognition serve as motivators (Ullrich, 1978; Tietjen & Myers, 1998). Extrinsic factors express salary, interpersonal relationships, and working conditions constitute hygienic factors. Both onsite and remote employees name extrinsic and intrinsic motivational factors. What is crucial to keep in mind is that although motivation in general increases job satisfaction, the motivational factors differ per person due to everyone's own identity (Locke, 1976, Yurtseven & Halici, 2012). Looking at Locke's (1976) job satisfaction factors helps to differentiate and structure the interviewees' responses. Locke's main motivational job factors are *'work', 'pay, promotions, and benefits and policies', 'peers and colleagues', 'supervisors and top leadership'* (Locke, 1976).

Work motivators include dedication to tasks and achieving excellence, along with mental challenges and growth opportunities to prevent boredom and exhaustion (Locke, 1976). The findings have shown that the primary motivation for onsite employees is the company's growth phase, aligning with Locke's research. Being in this stage presents an opportunity for them to make an impact, contribute, and enhance further development. Moreover, it creates learning opportunities to gain experience and enhance personal development, making it an exciting challenge for employees. So, the **growth within the company** poses to be pulling identification towards Azure for onsite employees. Also, for remote employees, work motivators are of importance, as the primary drive for their role stems from their desire to enhance their skill set, contribute to personal growth, and excel in their responsibilities. This means that **personal and professional development** is seen as motivational factor that pulls remote employees towards identification with Azure. Lastly, it became evident that the alignment of passion of personal and work life is of importance for most employees. At Azure, employees find motivation in

creating content and partnering with top brands they love. Some even see their roles as a perfect fusion of their hobbies and work. Hence, for both onsite and remote employees, **passion for the product and services** of Azure pulls them towards identification with the company.

The second motivator is *pay*, which should be justly provided. *Promotions* and *benefits* also contribute to personal satisfaction and ambition, highlighting the importance of equal developmental opportunities within organizations (Locke, 1976). Here, it becomes evident that none of the findings indicate that pay and benefits play an important motivational role for employees at Azure, unlike argued for by Locke. The motivation for promotions can be seen in the high level of ambition within the company culture, but it is not directly mentioned by the interviewees. Employees further add that they find fulfillment in contributing to the company's projects. Additionally, the companies' clients are a significant factor in their choice to work for Azure. This feeling of **contributing to the company's projects and clients** pulls employees towards identification with Azure.

In alignment with Locke's findings (1976) as *peers and colleagues* as motivational factors, the findings show that people and culture within Azure contribute to job satisfaction, mostly for onsite employees. Nevertheless, remote employees also see the daily connection with colleagues as a strong motivator to work for Azure. Thus, **people and culture** pull remote and onsite employees towards identification with Azure.

Lastly, we are delving into *supervisors and top leadership* as factors to increase job satisfaction (Locke, 1976), whereby effective top leadership should possess competence, enable others, and foster connections to drive organizational success (Schneider & Locke, 1971). Although the findings show that there is no strong hierarchy at Azure, and leadership is trustful and flexible towards employees, most employees also indicated forms of pressure due to project timelines and long working hours. The latter, **pressure due to project timelines and long working hours**, poses to be a factor that pushes onsite and remote employees away from the company. Henne and Locke (1985) claim that organizations benefit from fostering employee job satisfaction to enhance overall performance. This aligns with Greene's (1972) remark that satisfied employees tend to be more productive, indicating a link between productivity and job satisfaction, and conversely, between job dissatisfaction and decreased productivity.

The figure below shows the similarities and differences in those factors that *push* remote and onsite employees away from Azure, in addition the factors that *pull* the onsite and remote employees towards the company, on an individual level.

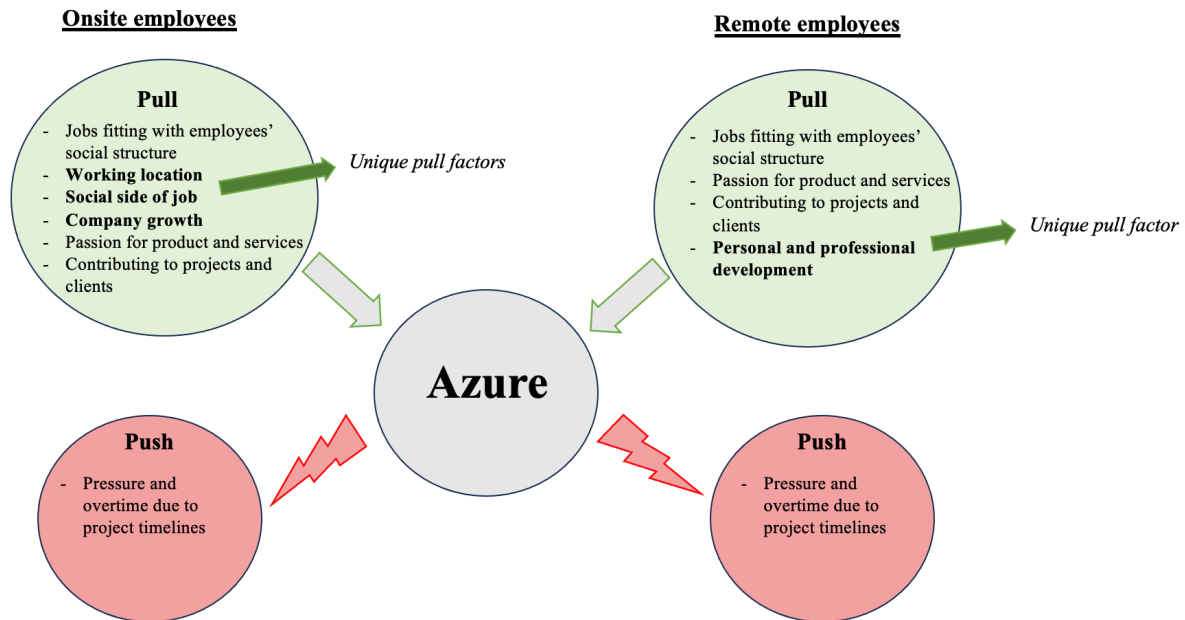


Fig. 6: Individual push and pull factors for remote and onsite employees at Azure

5.3 Individual and Organizational Level – Differences in organizational culture

Employee identity influences organizational identity (Zinkstein, 2018), and the other way around (Setyaningsih & Nawangsari, 2021). This means that it is hard to discuss the organizational level within a company, without also including the individual level. Hence, this section will be discussing the effects of employee identity on organizational identity, and vice versa. Within this section, we discuss the potential differences between onsite and remote employees when it comes to the **organizational culture**, by touching on topics related to company culture, sense of belonging, and common goals within Azure.

5.3.1 Colleagues who feel like family

"Job satisfaction towards traditional (office) culture and work from home culture" has been the subject of research done by Sarasu (2021). According to this study, most participants in that research group are happier with their work-from-home environment than they are with their regular office environment. The interviews with remote and onsite employees at Azure do not

indicate similar results: some employees mention that they do not feel too connected when working from the office due to a lack of team members working from the office, where others express their satisfaction with the office culture as it provides the opportunity to meet colleagues in real life and form more informal, interpersonal connections. Where the first factor – **lack of team members at the office** – pushes onsite employees away from identification with Azure, the second factor – **the opportunity to meet colleagues in person at the office** – pulls them towards identification with Azure. Onsite employees describe Azure’s culture to be open, friendly, nice and collaborative. Although, altogether, all onsite and remote employees describe a positive working atmosphere in which employees are genuinely passionate about their work. This overall positive connotation with Azure’s company culture is important, as McShane and Von Glinow (2010, cited in Praningrum et al., 2023) link a company’s work environment and emotional experiences at work with job satisfaction. In turn, job satisfaction increases employees’ productivity (Greene, 1972) and overall achievements (Henne & Locke, 1985). Therefore, it would also be in Azure’s own interest to make sure that their employees feel positively about the company culture. This indicates that **Azure’s company culture** poses to be a factor that pulls onsite and remote employees towards identification with the company.

Although remote employees struggled to come up with a definition of the company culture as first, as “this can only truly be felt at the office” (Juan, 2024), the answers describing Azure’s culture turned out to be mostly positive. As indicated above, this is not the case for the onsite employees, who did mention a couple of negative factors related to Azure’s culture. While there are a variety of reasons why this could be the case for any firm, study by Hills (2015) explores the implications that "pessimistic, gloomy, and cynical" individuals can have on any workplace culture. According to their research, if the team manager does not step in, an excessively pessimistic team member can readily disseminate their pessimism to other members of the team. However, within Azure, the slight pessimism that is felt amongst employees at Azure, primarily has to do with the company’s “hard working mentality”. Where this mentality is described as part of the company’s culture, there are positive and negative associations with the phenomenon. Where remote employees mainly mention this part of Azure’s culture as something positive, resulting in growth and happy clients, onsite employees tend to associate this phenomenon as the main reason for overtime, pressure, and stress. Overtime, pressure, and stress can lead to job dissatisfaction and therefore disconnectedness with the organization (Henne & Locke, 1985). Hence, where the **‘hard working mentality’**

poses to be a pull factor for remote employees, the same ‘hard working mentality’ poses to be a push factor for onsite employees.

5.3.2 The core of connectivity

Rather than concentrating only on individual role behaviors, social identity theory emphasizes the dynamics within groups and interactions between different groups (Desrochers, 2004). According to this theory, people also want to maintain or grow a positive social identity, which boosts their sense of self (Brown, 2000). People may leave their group if they find their identity unfulfilling or search for other methods to distinguish their group in a positive way. When relating the social identity theory to employees at Azure, we analyze the employees within the social context of the direct and indirect colleagues the employees work with, in addition to their management. Hence, during the interviews with onsite and remote employees, we touched on the topic of the employees’ sense of belonging within their team and the company. Multiple onsite employees mentioned that the teams consist of people from different cultural backgrounds and nationalities, which creates a more inclusive atmosphere that causes people to feel like they belong. Hence, the **multicultural workforce of Azure** is seen as a factor that pulls onsite employees towards identification with the company. By these statements it becomes clear that the onsite employees at Azure do not merely categorize themselves in the “Azure social group”, but also into different social subgroups based on nationality and culture (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). This clarifies the significance of the employees' perceptions of themselves in connection to interpersonal interactions and group dynamics (Hogg, 2016).

So, it is clear that social identity theory does not focus only on individual role behaviors; rather, it emphasizes the dynamics within groups and the relationships between different groups (Desrochers, 2004). Zooming into the relationships and interpersonal connections between different groups within Azure, it becomes evident that employees, particularly those who work remotely, express a sense of belonging with both the organization and their direct colleagues. These employees explicitly state that having a sense of belonging to their team and the organization is not negatively influenced by online communication. Thus, **good online communication** pulls remote employees towards identification with Azure. However, contradictorily, half of these remote employees do mention that they do not have to many personal connections with colleagues online. Therefore, the **low frequency at which personal connections are made** may push remote employees away from identification. Nevertheless, the ones that they do have are deemed to be very valuable and highly contribute to the overall sense

of belonging. It is interesting to note that remote employees do not seem to experience a lack of personal connection with their colleagues, where onsite employees do indicate a noticeable difference in connection between onsite and remote employees. Therefore, the disconnection is not primarily noticeable for remote employees, but more noticeable for those who work onsite. This means that the **scattered workforce** may be pushing onsite employees away from identifying with the company. These results go counter to the claims made by Dery and Hafermalz (2016), who found that remote employees may find it difficult to build and preserve informal and interpersonal relationships with their coworkers and the company. The worry expressed by Hafermalz and Riemer (2016) is that employees who only work remotely may become socially isolated. According to their research, a seemingly insignificant virtual coffee talk could strengthen and expand remote employees' feeling of community inside the team and company. An important nuance that may explain the difference in findings is brought up by Ten Broeke (2022), who mentions that, given that employees have had a considerable amount of time to adjust to a new remote-working setup since the onset of the global pandemic in 2020, remote working may no longer have a detrimental impact on workplace belonging. The “new way of working” as suggested by Ten Broeke (2022) is also mentioned by one onsite employee, who states that “there’s no way you can’t have a remote company in 2024” (Isabelle, 2024).

As mentioned above, most employees do not express a major disconnection from the company. The examples that are provided by the few remote employees who expressed an occasional disconnection from Azure, primarily focus on work tasks rather than working location. Both remote and onsite employees explain that the rapid growth of Azure leads to new roles being established that are only broadly defined and hence vague. Besides, the growth necessitates new employees, which means that team members may not have had the time to get to know each other that well. Since social bonding and interpersonal connection are considered major determinants of an employee's sense of belonging to a firm (Hogg, 2016), lack of time to bond with colleagues may negatively impact the employees’ identification with Azure. Therefore, **company growth that results in lack of direction in the employees’ role definition and team dynamics** may push employees away from identification with Azure.

Moreover, the growth causes an increase in workload, pressure from management, and hence stress amongst employees. This last factor might result in rapid and conflicting demands, which may lead to fragmented working conditions which are common in modern workplaces (Sennett, 1998; cited in Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2016, p.34). Although common in workplaces such

as Azure, the conflicting ideals and demands that result into stressful situations for employees, may lead to struggles with the employees' personal identities and sense of belonging with the organization. Therefore, **these conflicting ideals and demands that result into stressful situations** may result in employees being pushed away from identifying with the company. Although, it is common for individuals to continuously shape and refine their identity in response to various influences, which is described as identity work by Sveningsson and Alvesson (2016). Both onsite and remote employees describe how they shape their identity in response to the company's growth and organizational changes, for example by changing the way they think about building online connections and thus remote working (Sam, 2024) or finding different ways of working to avoid overtime, rather than quitting their job (Juan, 2024).

5.3.3 Being the best in the industry

Leuthesser and Kohli (1997) note that a company's mission statement is typically regarded as essential to assisting a company in forming its identity, purpose, and direction. This company mission, also referred to as a common goal, was easy for remote employees to come up with, but harder to define for the onsite employees. In light of Leuthesser and Kohli's (1997) findings, this may suggest that remote employees have a bigger sense of purpose and identification within Azure, compared to onsite employees. Moreover, Toh et al. (2022) indicate that it is important for employees to share their sense making regarding the company mission, as it is an influential factor when it comes to value compatibility between the employees and the company. The diversity in answers on the company mission by onsite employees may indicate a decreased value compatibility between Azure and its onsite employees. Remote employees, on the other hand, shared rather similar company goals, and thus sense making, which suggest that this group might have a higher value compatibility with the company. On the other hand, a mission statement is frequently deemed "polymorphic in nature: one idea, many implementations," according to Leuthesser and Kohli (1997, p.63). This suggests that a mission statement's significance depends on the reader—their identity, values, and principles. This "polymorphic nature" explains the difference in answers between remote and onsite employees, since these different groups may hold different identities, values and principles.

According to Toh et al. (2022), managements involvement in explaining the company's mission statement is one of the most influential factors. Hence, another reason for the diverse views on the company's mission statement, might be the (lack of) involvement of management

in clarifying the company’s common goal. It is important for management at Azure to communicate an overall common goal within the company, as this will ultimately result in higher performance and satisfaction levels among employees. Since a shared objective among employees often improves this degree of satisfaction and, ultimately, employee retention, it is crucial for businesses to develop a company-wide mission statement that outlines this shared objective (Cloutier et al., 2015).

Additionally, those employees who have a high sense of belonging are nearly six times more likely to be actively engaged in achieving the mission of the organization, compared to employees who have a weaker feeling of belonging (Pettita & Ghezzi, 2023). Hence, it could be argued that remote employees feel a greater sense of belonging compared to onsite employees, given the ease at which they could come up with a common company objective. Thus, **the common goal** amongst remote employees pulls them towards identifying with Azure, where **the lack of this common goal** amongst onsite employees pushes them away from identifying with Azure. This is an important factor to consider for Azure, as employees' emotional energy may be lowered because of a greater degree of workplace disconnection, which also increases mistrust and resentment (Pettita & Ghezzi, 2023).

The figure on the next page shows the similarities and differences in those factors that *push* remote and onsite employees away from Azure, in addition the factors that *pull* the onsite and remote employees towards the company, on an individual and organizational level.

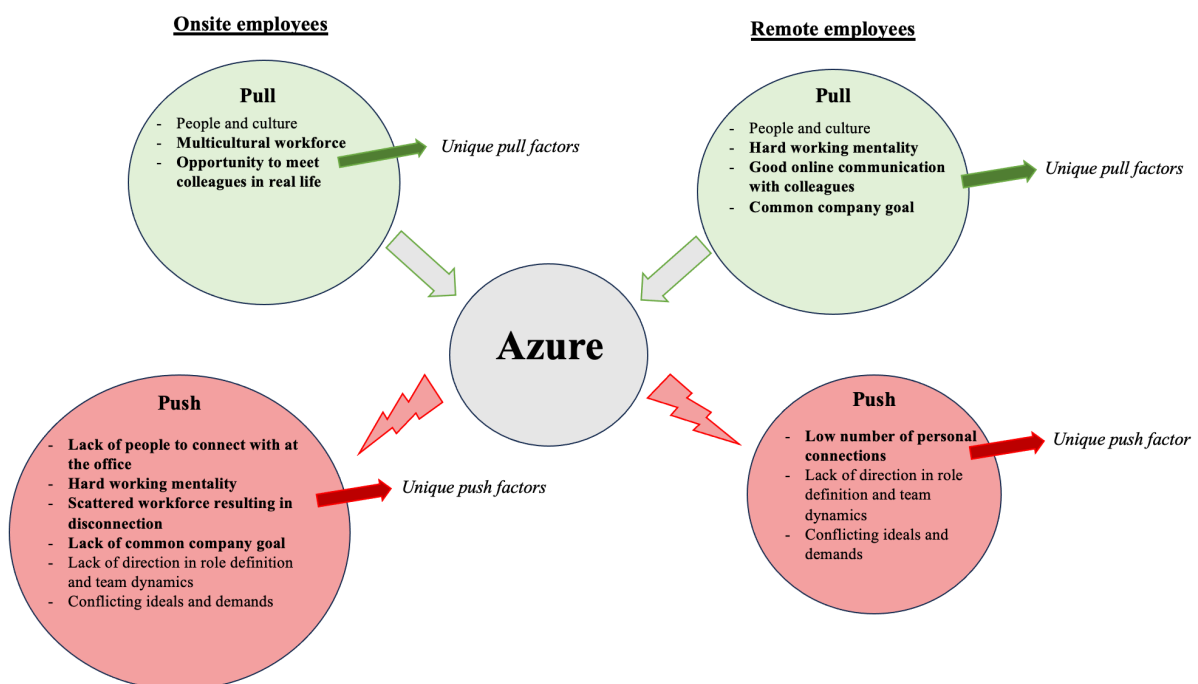


Fig. 7: Individual and organizational push and pull factors for remote and onsite employees at Azure

5.4 Group Level – Differences in flexibility and remote working

Flexibility and remote working possibilities organically grew within Azure since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Ever since, different dynamics have unfolded in the company, and different opinions and perceptions on Azure's flexible remote working policy have formed. There's a difference in opinions on flexibility and **remote working** between onsite and remote employees at Azure, which will be discussed in this section.

5.4.1 Two sides of flexibility

The findings have shown that Azure is very flexible towards their employees, yet this flexibility is also expected from the employees in return. Examining research on work-life balance and flexibility reveals different types of flexibility affecting job satisfaction (Goudswaard & de Nanteuil, 2000). While quantitative flexibility shows no impact, qualitative flexibility positively influences job satisfaction due to its association with intrinsic motivators. The quantitative flexibility towards employees is mentioned by interviewees as adaptable working hours and schedules, and the opportunity of working remotely. Furthermore, findings have indicated that most employees are satisfied with being trusted to create their own deadlines and working methods. Therefore, this **trust to create own deadlines and working methods** within Azure is a pull factor for both onsite and remote employees. Phillips (2020) argues, that as remote work becomes more common, aspects like processes and company culture, often overlooked in traditional office settings, require refinement to sustain a positive and productive remote work environment. Therefore, the leadership of a company needs to adapt to the remote workforce, by restructuring processes and redefining qualities. The qualities consist of “trust, respect, communication, shared values, and culture” (Phillips, 2020, p. 1). As indicated as a necessity by Phillips (2020), the findings also show that employees generally feel trusted by their management due to the flexibility offered. According to Locke (1976), this aspect is crucial for employees to be satisfied in their job. Management and colleagues should work together to create a bond of trust and be considerate and supportive to each other. When leadership is trustful and enabling towards their employees, organizational success can be achieved (Locke, 1976; Schneider & Locke, 1971). Thus, for both onsite and remote employees, **the trust that employees feel from their (management) team** pulls them towards identification with Azure.

However, as mentioned at the beginning of this section, flexibility has two sides at Azure. The findings show that mainly remote employees mention their suffering from long working hours, which is a result of flexible working hours. Therefore, again, **overtime as a result of flexible working hours** push remote employees away from identification with Azure. Managers, in times of change, also face external pressures that influence both their work and their personal identity (Sinclair, 2011; cited in Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2016). Sveningsson and Alvesson (2016) argue that managers may face situations where they struggle to maintain a stable self-view, which can affect their employees. Furthermore, in such a fast-growing company like Azure it is required that employees can think and work in a flexible manner, as well as rethinking and adapting quickly. The fast-paced working environment requires managers to set tight deadlines, since the market is highly competitive, hence, clients need to be pleased with timely projects. This leads to overtime and stress for many of the interviewees. According to Cable and Welbourne (1994), a growing company requires change, thus they argue that a company benefits by focusing on employee's identity in relation to the results of the growth and change, to increase efficiency. Complex identity, whether personal, societal, or organizational identity, is crucial to observe during times of stress and change in groups (Smollan & Pio, 2017). Different stages of change bring out various emotions, such as stress. Companies often change their culture to boost employee engagement and satisfaction, as research shows that organizational culture strongly impacts job satisfaction (Afkar & Sayekti, 2020; Setyaningsih & Nawangsari, 2021). Happy and engaged employees are more motivated, leading to higher efficiency and loyalty to the company (Matzler & Renzl, 2006). Looking at the findings, it is seen that most employees within Azure feel generally happy and satisfied within their role in the company, regardless of the overtime and stress mentioned before.

5.4.2 Work with anyone, from anywhere

The findings indicate that there is a mix of positive and negative responses by onsite employees, talking about their remote colleagues. Remote employees' reasons to work remotely are mainly to stay close to their family, wanting to live in preferred city, or avoiding a bad job market. For other remote employees, remote working simply 'happened' when they started working at Azure; they felt motivated to work for the company, and remote working was the best way to do so given personal circumstances. Onsite employees rather have the option to work at the offices due to the social environment, interaction, and the ability to get to know colleagues in person. Research by Sarasu (2021) suggests that many prefer working from

home over traditional office setups. However, Hills (2015) warns that pessimistic, negatively adjusted employees can harm office culture by spreading negativity, if not managed effectively.

The company and leadership support remote work and offer the possibility to work fully or partially remote to all employees. They further show support by giving remote employees the opportunity to join events in the offices by organizing their travel to the respective office. An interesting finding shows that while onsite employees generally argue that remote working is resulting in increased productivity, remote employees mostly say their productivity is decreased at times. While onsite employees get distracted from colleagues and coffee breaks, remote employees find distraction because of their family or their flexible working hours. Therefore, **lack of productivity when working remotely** pushes remote employees away from identifying with Azure, where **increasing productivity when working remotely** pulls onsite employees towards identification with the company. This contradiction aligns with contradictions found in existing research. Some research indicates that remote work may lead to decreased productivity because of the lack of immediate face-to-face communication and bad telecommunication setups (Morikawa, 2020), where contrasting findings suggest the opposite outcome (Barrero et al., 2021). For example, according to Evans and McCoy (1998), employees' stress levels will be increased, and focus will be decreased, when an individual is exposed to an overload of stimuli at the office. Yet another conclusion is drawn by Haynes (2008), who argues that there is no clear connection between an office layout and productivity of employees.

The findings indicate, that although some remote employees get the opportunity to come to the office to partake in events and feel connected to their colleagues by meeting them online daily, most interviewees stated that there is a difference in connection between remote and onsite employees. The difference between remote and onsite employees is the atmosphere at the office that remote employees miss out on, including small-talk, coffee breaks, and similar in-person communication. Moreover, nearly all onsite employees spontaneously reference their partially remote teams without being asked, and most remote employees mention their remote status unprompted. This shows that partially remote teamwork plays an important factor in all employees' work life. However, where **remote teamwork** pulls remote employees towards identification with Azure, **remote teamwork** seems to be pushing onsite employees away from identification with the company. In general, it should be noted that employee wellbeing, no matter remote or onsite, can positively or negatively be influenced by factors like autonomy,

control, and flexibility (McPhail et al., 2023). Since the findings show that these factors are mainly present within Azure, this may be one of the reasons why remote working is mainly perceived as a positive opportunity. Moreover, the factor of trust in organizational leaders, as well as the other way around, also correlates with positive remote work experiences.

The figure below shows the similarities and differences in those factors that *push* remote and onsite employees away from Azure, in addition the factors that *pull* the onsite and remote employees towards the company, on a group level.

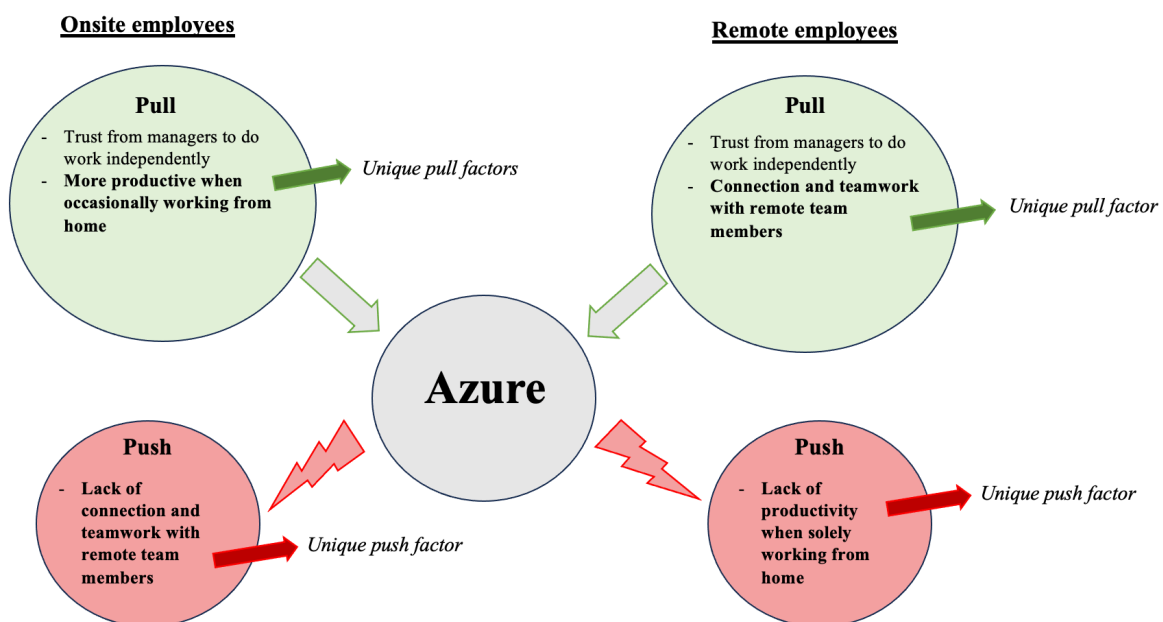


Fig. 8: Group level push and pull factors for remote and onsite employees at Azure

5.5 Chapter Summary

Within the discussion chapter, we identify different factors that **push employees away from identification with Azure**, and factors that **pull employees towards identifying with Azure**. This is done by analyzing the research findings in the light of existing literature. Moreover, several ‘unique push factors’ have been identified. These unique push factors represent those factors that solely impact either remote or onsite employees on an individual, organizational, or group level. By doing so, a difference between the two groups is identified.

6. Conclusion

In this chapter, conclusions are drawn from the discussion chapter, where the findings and existing literature review are carefully analyzed and compared. With these conclusions, we aim to answer the research question.

What factors affect identification of onsite and remote employees in contemporary organizations on an individual, organizational, and group level?

Looking at the discussion, it can be seen that the change within Azure, as a result of organic growth, is discussed in light of the different viewpoints of onsite and remote employees. We discuss the ‘growing pains’ that come with a growing and internationalizing workforce, which mainly lies within forms of communication, the formation of human connections, and increasing pressure and workload. Besides, different working locations result in different ways of identification as employee.

By identifying the factors that push remote and onsite employees away from identification with Azure, in combination with the factors that pull onsite and remote employee towards identification with Azure, this research creates an overview of the most essential factors that affect the employees’ identification process. This is done separately per individual, group, and organizational level. By doing so, we conclude that there are similarities and differences between the two groups – onsite and remote employees.

Starting with the differences that are detected, the following figure showcases an overview of the ‘unique push and pull factors’ that the remote and onsite employees have. These unique factors affect employee identification of onsite and remote employees in contemporary organizations on an individual, organizational, and group level.

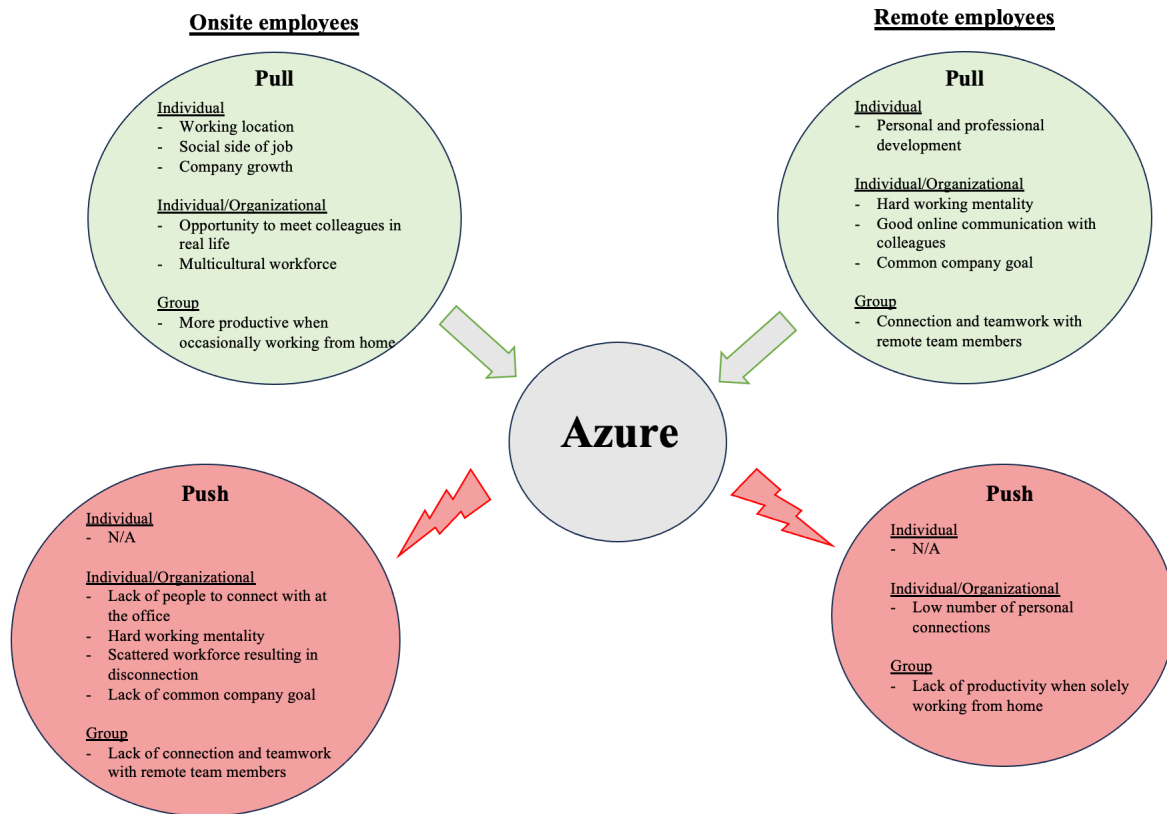


Fig. 9: Unique push and pull factors for remote and onsite employees at Azure

The unique push and pull factors also show that there are opposite needs for onsite and remote employees. For example, on a group level, productivity increases when working from home for onsite employees, but productivity decreases when working from home for remote employee. Besides, on an individual and organizational level, the hard-working mentality proves to be a pull factor for remote employees, where this same hard-working mentality is a push factor for onsite employees. The same is true for the common company goal: this is a pull factor for remote employees, but the lack thereof is a push factor for onsite employees. Lastly, it is remarkable that remote employees are pulled towards the company by the connection they feel towards their colleagues, where onsite employees are pushed away from Azure by the lack of connection with their remote colleagues. Hence, it can be concluded that remote and onsite employees have opposite identification factors in some regards, which should be considered by the company when wanting to develop a personalized culture and leadership plan.

Yet, similarities between onsite and remote employees, when considering their identification with Azure, have also been found. These factors affect employee identification of both onsite and remote employees in contemporary organizations on an individual, organizational, and group level.

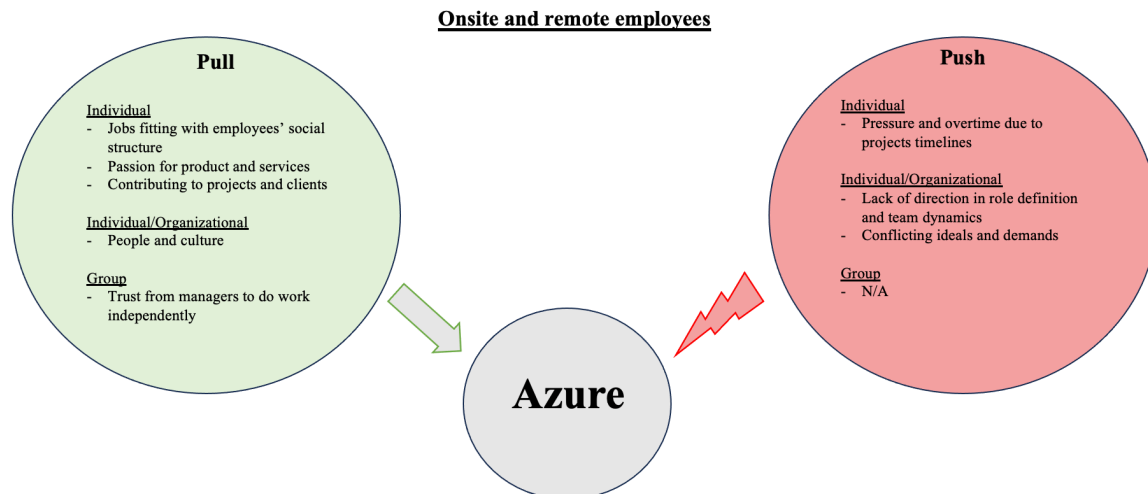


Fig. 10: Similar push and pull factors for remote and onsite employees at Azure

All in all, although there appear to be slightly more differences than similarities between onsite and remote employees, there is no strong distinction to conclude a significant difference in identification with Azure between these two groups. Yet, with these factors in mind, Azure can make a personalized distinction between onsite and remote employees to define their company culture and create their employee engagement plan, suitable for their growing and internationalizing company.

6.1 Key takeaways for contemporary organizations

- Identity theory is complex since an individual has several identities that are formed by different social contexts and underly a salient concept of which identity is forward-pressing.
- Identity and culture should be seen as distinct concepts. Yet, there are some connections, since the “self” can be explained through cultural material.
- Organizational identity means that the essence of an organization is shaped by its members and the culture they cultivate and belong to.
- Remote work increased in organizations due to the COVID-19 pandemic, however contemporary organizations, being adaptable, attend to continuous change and modified their workforce to enable remote work.
- **Unique pull factors** for **onsite** employees are: working location, the social side of the job, company growth, meeting colleagues in real life, higher productivity level when occasionally working from home.
- **Unique pull factors** for **remote** employees are: personal and professional development, hardworking mentality, good online communication with colleagues, a common company goal, connection with remote team members.
- **Unique push factors** for **onsite** employees are: lack of people to connect with at the office, hardworking mentality, scattered workforce, lack of company goal, lack of connection to remote team members.
- **Unique push factors** for **remote** employees are: low number of personal connections, lack of productivity in home office.
- To conclude, onsite and remote employees have a couple of opposite push and pull factors which should be considered when wanting to create a personalized culture and employee engagement plan.

6.2 Limitations and suggestions for further research

The studies' main constraint is the scope of the research, including the scope of the research population and the timeframe. The limited time available to conduct the study, in addition to a word limit of the report, forced us to work with a population of 14 interviewees, which may not be representative for the full population of Azure consisting of around 300 employees. The research might therefore not be representative for other contemporary scale-up organizations. Moreover, the timeframe of the research caused the interviews to be done at a single point in time. Hence, we suggest for this topic to be researched on a broader scale, over a larger period, to make sure that the findings of the research are more relevant for other contemporary organizations.

The fact that one of us works for the case company may pose a limitation due to a potential researcher bias that can come into play. This means that one of us holds on to their own employee identity towards the case company, which could alter the sense making process and therefore influence the outcome of the research. On the other hand, this factor may have also contributed positively to the outcome of the research as the interviewees might have felt more inclined to open up about their thoughts and feelings towards a person they know and trust. Nevertheless, to cancel out a potential research bias, we suggest that similar research should be conducted by one or multiple non-biased researchers. However, as this study is grounded in interpretivism which may account for our personal biases and interpretations, it may not be fully possible to cancel out the chances of a researcher's bias.

Lastly, the topic of identity poses to be a potential limitation. The subject itself is rather ambiguous in nature which makes it hard to define definite terms. For example, some sources may be unintentionally functionalistic, where others might place these studies under the interpretive stance.

In spite of the limitations, we are confident to offer intriguing insights from a unique case, aiding a better understanding of the often-elusive concept of identity.

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