SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS AND MANAGEMENT

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When Generative AI Becomes a Colleague: Managers Making Sense of AI Advice at Work

by

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Abstract

Title	When Generative AI Becomes a Colleague: Managers Making Sense of AI Advice at Work
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Aim	This study explores how managers interpret, evaluate and integrate Generative AI (GenAI) as a source of advice in their day-to-day work. As GenAI becomes more embedded in organizational contexts, the study identifies a need to better understand how managers make sense of AI-generated suggestions in situations characterized by ambiguity, time pressure and uncertainty.
Methodology	In this qualitative study, we adopt an abductive approach within an interpretivist framework. Seven semi-structured interviews were conducted with managers from different organizational contexts who actively used GenAI in their professional work. We have analyzed empirical material through the lens of sensemaking theory, with a specific focus on extracted cues, plausibility, identity construction and social context.
Contributions	Our study demonstrates how AI-generated advice becomes embedded within managerial interpretation and judgment rather than functioning only as external decision support. The study further shows how AI-generated formulation shapes managerial reasoning, influencing how organizational situations are understood before decisions are consciously evaluated. The study therefore contributes to advice-taking and managerial sensemaking literature by arguing that AI-generated formulation itself can function as a form of advice before decisions are consciously evaluated.
Keywords	Generative AI, managerial sensemaking, AI-generated advice, formulation, plausibility, managerial judgment, AI-supported managerial work

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Almir & Samar

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1. Introduction

Picture this:

> *Emma, a 33-year-old manager at a large technology company, is sitting late in the afternoon preparing for an important meeting while emails continue arriving, deadlines are approaching and unresolved issues still require her attention. With limited time and uncertainty about how to structure her thoughts, she opens ChatGPT to get some advice. Within seconds, the system generates alternative formulations, summarizes information and suggests possible ways forward that sound both professional and convincing. Over time, Emma begins relying on generative AI in similar situations, such as drafting sensitive messages, preparing presentations and exploring ideas before meetings. Although the system helps her work more efficiently, she also becomes aware of a new kind of uncertainty. Some responses appear highly convincing despite lacking contextual understanding, while the responsibility for evaluating and acting on the information still remains with her as the manager.*

This scenario, which is inspired by our findings, illustrates how generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) is becoming more integrated into everyday managerial work as a source of advice and support, especially in situations where decisions need to be made quickly despite uncertainty, competing demands and limited time.

1.1 Background

"*Whenever you see a successful business, someone once made a courageous decision*" (Drucker, cited in Goodreads, n.d.). At the center of managerial work lies the responsibility of responding to changing organizational conditions while making judgments in situations that are rarely predictable or straightforward (OpenStax, 2019). Because managerial decisions rarely involve direct answers, managers often seek advice and additional perspectives to support their judgments and decision-making (Ma et al., 2020).

In recent years, technological developments have introduced new forms of support into managerial work through artificial intelligence, which has gained widespread attention due to its ability to perform tasks that have been traditionally associated with human expertise (Dwivedi & Elluri, 2024). GenAI refers to AI systems that generate new content based on patterns identified in large amounts of training data and in response to user prompts (Nguyen, 2025). In practice, these systems support users in information processing, idea generation and problem-solving (Jarrahi et al., 2025), which has contributed to GenAI becoming more integrated into organizational work because of its potential to support decision-making and make work processes more efficient (Raman et al., 2024).

Farri & Rosani (2025) describe the release of OpenAI's ChatGPT in November 2022 as a shift in human-AI collaboration, because its conversational interface enabled more fluid and human-like interaction between users and AI systems. The simplicity of the technology lead to its rapid adoption, with ChatGPT reaching 100 million monthly active users within two months of its launch (Farri & Rosani, 2025). The authors further describe this development as a "*symbiotic collaboration with technology*", emphasizing how GenAI is transforming the relationship between managers and digital systems (Farri & Rosani, 2025, p. 17).

Despite the growing integration of GenAI into organizational work, our review of the literature also shows that questions about the reliability of these systems have become increasingly difficult to ignore. OpenAI itself acknowledges that although AI-generated responses may appear highly human-like, outputs can at times be "*inaccurate, untruthful and otherwise misleading*" (OpenAI, 2025). Similar observations appear throughout recent research, where scholars describe how GenAI systems can produce responses that sound coherent and convincing despite lacking contextual understanding or factual accuracy, which makes it challenging for users to determine how trustworthy the information is (Olson, 2024; Yang et al., 2025; Varshney et al., 2026). More importantly, the distinction between technological tools

and advisory support is becoming less distinct, as GenAI systems are used not only to provide information but also to offer advice or guidance (Jarrahi et al., 2025). This distinction may become further complicated by the conversational and responsive nature of GenAI systems, where users engage in ongoing back-and-forth interaction with the technology rather than simply receiving static outputs. Turkle (2011) argues that human-like interaction with technology can create a sense of "*near communion*", where individuals begin relating to technological systems in ways that extend beyond purely functional use. Although AI systems are often described as support rather than replace managerial work, where human judgment is expected to remain central to final decision-making (Davenport & Kirby, 2016), such assumptions may overlook how AI-generated outputs actively shape how situations are interpreted, formulated and understood before decisions are even made.

To the best of our knowledge, we noticed that much of the research on GenAI mainly focuses on what these systems are capable of doing together with the broader concerns related to reliability, transparency and responsible use. Several studies describe how GenAI can improve efficiency, support decision-making and help organizations process information more quickly. We found less extensive research focusing on how managers themselves experience and make sense of using GenAI in their everyday work. Even though GenAI is often presented as a tool that can support managers through recommendations, interpretations and rapid access to information, we find that these descriptions may not fully capture the sensemaking involved in managers´ use of GenAI.

Managerial work involves not only accessing information but also interpreting situations and evaluating different perspectives in order to know how to act. In this context, it still remains unclear how managers interpret and make sense of AI-generated suggestions in their everyday work as well as how these outputs influence their judgment and decisions in practice. We therefore see a need for further research that provides deeper insight into how managers work with and make sense of GenAI in their everyday responsibilities.

This study explores how managers experience and make sense of using GenAI in their everyday work. By examining managers' own reflections and experiences of interacting with GenAI as a form of advisory support, we shed light on how AI-generated suggestions become part of everyday managerial thinking, judgment and decision-making. In doing so, this study contributes to the fields of management and organizational studies by expanding the understanding of how emerging AI technologies influence how managers interpret situations, reflect on different possible actions and work through decisions. By combining perspectives on

managerial work, advice-seeking and sensemaking, the study brings together theoretical perspectives that are often discussed separately, creating a broader understanding of what happens when managers begin working with GenAI in practice.

1.2 Research Question

Based on the rapid integration of Generative AI into managerial work, this thesis aims to explore how managers relate to and use GenAI as a source of advice in everyday work, leading to the following research question:

> *How do managers interpret, evaluate and integrate Generative AI as a source of advice in their day-to-day work?*

1.3 Thesis Outline

This thesis is divided into six main chapters, each contributing to a deeper understanding of how managers make sense of and engage with GenAI as a source of advice in everyday managerial work. The *introductory chapter* aims to gain the reader's attention by problematizing the research area, presenting background on GenAI, advice-taking, managerial sensemaking and organizational contexts, as well as highlighting the relevance of the present study.

Chapter 2 provides the *literature review* and theoretical foundation of the thesis. The chapter begins by exploring managerial work as fragmented, ambiguous and advice-driven before examining how advice is interpreted and integrated into managerial decision-making. Thereafter, the chapter discusses how digital technologies and AI systems shape managerial work, with particular focus on GenAI as a form of advisory support. Finally, sensemaking is introduced as the main theoretical lens of the study, focusing on the four selected properties of *extracted cues, plausibility, identity construction* and *social context.*

The literature review leads into Chapter 3, which presents the *methodological approach* of the study. The chapter outlines the philosophical foundations guiding the research, including the constructionist ontology, interpretivist epistemology and symbolic interactionist perspective. It further explains the abductive research approach, the exploratory qualitative design and the use of semi-structured interviews for collecting empirical material. Thereafter, we describe the analytical process, reflect on methodological limitations and discuss the use of GenAI throughout the research process.

Chapter 4 presents the *empirical findings* from interviews with managers using GenAI in their professional work. The findings are analyzed through the four selected sensemaking properties and explore how managers interpret, evaluate and integrate AI-generated suggestions in everyday managerial situations. In addition, the chapter presents an emerging theme identified throughout the analysis, highlighting how GenAI may subtly influence managerial reasoning and formulation processes in practice.

Chapter 5 *discusses* the findings in relation to the research question, theoretical framework and previous research, offering a deeper interpretation of how managers make sense of and engage with GenAI as a source of advice in their day-to-day work. In this way, it serves as a bridge between the empirical material and the broader discussion surrounding managerial sensemaking, judgment and AI-supported work.

Finally, Chapter 6 puts the final puzzle piece in place by *summarizing* the key findings and presenting the study's theoretical and practical contributions, before reflecting on the study's limitations and offering suggestions for future research.

2. Literature Review

This chapter presents the theoretical perspectives relevant to understanding how managers engage with GenAI as a source of advice in everyday managerial work. It begins by examining managerial work as fragmented, uncertain and increasingly advice-driven, before exploring how advice is sought, interpreted and integrated into decision-making. The chapter then discusses how digital technologies and AI systems shape managerial work, with a focus on GenAI as a form of advisory support. Finally, sensemaking is introduced as the main theoretical lens for understanding how managers interpret AI-generated suggestions and construct meaning in uncertain situations.

2.1 Managerial Work as Ambiguous and Advice-Driven

"*The classical view says that the manager organizes, coordinates, plans and controls; the facts suggest otherwise*" (Mintzberg, 1975, p. 49). This statement challenges the traditional understanding of management by questioning whether managerial work is truly as structured and systematic as classical theory suggests. While the classical perspective presents managers as rational planners, Mintzberg argued that managerial work should be understood through what managers do in practice.

Through direct observations of managers and executives, he discovered that managerial work was highly fragmented, fast-paced and centered around communication and relationships instead of long-term structured planning. Based on these observations, he developed the concept of managerial roles to explain managerial practice more realistically: *interpersonal, informational and decisional roles.* The interpersonal roles focus on managers' relationships and interactions with others emphasizing that managerial work is highly dependent on communication and human interaction instead of formal planning. Secondly, the informational roles describe managers as central sources of information who continuously gather and share information to handle changing situations. As a result, managerial work is often fast-paced and filled with constant interruptions. Furthermore, the decisional roles explain how managers use information to solve problems and make decisions in uncertain and complex situations. Together, these roles present management as a dynamic and practice-based activity shaped by communication, adaptability and changing organizational demands (Mintzberg, 1975, p. 54-57).

Building on Mintzberg's work, Kurke and Aldrich (1983) examined managerial work across different organizational settings and identified many of the same characteristics in managers'

daily activities, reinforcing Mintzberg's view of managerial work as fragmented, fast-paced and strongly shaped by ongoing interactions. Like Mintzberg, they found that managers spent much of their time on meetings, conversations and short activities, while interruptions and shifting demands influenced how work was carried out. Their findings also showed that managers often had limited control over how their workday unfolded, since much of their time and attention was directed by requests, interactions and demands from others rather than by carefully planned schedules. This also reflects later observations by Kotter (1982), who described managerial work as highly conversational and interaction-driven, where managers spend most of their time communicating with others, reacting to emerging situations and handling a wide range of issues at the same time. Kotter further showed that managers rarely work in long uninterrupted periods, but instead move quickly between meetings, discussions and unexpected situations, often covering multiple unrelated topics within only a few minutes.

Moreover, Wallo & Coetzer (2023) demonstrates that practitioners' work is highly fragmented, reactive and dominated by ongoing interactions such as meetings and responding to emerging issues, which leaves limited opportunity for uninterrupted work. Such fragmented and fast-paced work environments therefore reflect ambiguity in managerial practice. In organizational settings, mainly within public and semi-professional contexts, work is carried out in "*grey areas*" where standardized solutions are unavailable and individual decision-making becomes necessary (Rønningstad, 2019, p. 6). Similarly, Noordegraaf et al. (2007) show how managerial work is shaped by organizational demands and overlapping responsibilities, making it difficult to maintain stable routines or clearly defined tasks.

Given these conditions, managers cannot rely solely on their own knowledge when making decisions. Instead, managerial decision-making often develops through interaction with others, where advice and external input become important parts of the process. Research on advice-taking shows that many important decisions are made by individuals who consult others while still remaining responsible for the final outcome (Bonaccio & Dalal, 2006). This research reflects how managerial decision-making often takes place in situations where advice is available but not binding, requiring managers to actively determine how it should be interpreted and used. Kämmer et al. (2023) describe advice as information or recommendations provided by others to support a decision. They further argue that managers often seek advice in situations of risk and uncertainty because it can provide relevant new information, help fill knowledge gaps and support decision-making (Kämmer et al., 2023). Importantly, research also suggests

that managers appear to seek even more advice from others when facing higher levels of uncertainty (Alexiev et al., 2010; Heyden et al., 2013).

Building on Kämmer et al. (2023) definition of advice, they described advice-based decision-making as a staged process in which individuals seek, evaluate and integrate advice into a final judgment. This perspective highlights how advice is embedded within, rather than separate from, the overall decision-making process. Additionally, research on advice-taking highlights that decision-making involves both social and cognitive processes where individuals do not simply adopt advice as it is given but combine it with their own initial judgments. In the judge-advisor system, decision-makers first form an initial judgment, receive advice from others and then revise their decision based on the weight they assign to that advice (Bailey et al., 2023; Bonaccio & Dalal 2006). In this regard, decision-makers are more likely to rely on advice when the advisor appears knowledgeable and trustworthy, either through visible expertise or through the perceived quality of the advice itself (Schultze et al., 2025).

At the same time, using advice involves more than simply accepting external input, as managers must interpret the advice they receive and determine how much weight to assign to it. Harvey et al. (2000) highlights that advice from different sources may vary in quality and can sometimes conflict, meaning that decision-makers must compare different perspectives before reaching a final judgment. This can be cognitively demanding, as combining advice involves a heavier processing load than evaluating each individual input separately, especially when several perspectives must be considered within limited time (Harvey et al., 2000).

However, individuals may overvalue advice that appears credible or undervalue advice that is objectively useful, depending on how it is presented and interpreted. For example, framing information as advice rather than as a simple opinion can increase its perceived helpfulness and lead decision-makers to assign it greater weight (Milyavsky & Gvili, 2024). The way information is communicated may therefore shape how it is interpreted and whether it is acted upon, while internal factors such as confidence also influence advice-taking behavior. Pescetelli & Yeung (2021) explains that individuals who are more confident in their initial judgments are less likely to adjust their decisions in response to advice, whereas lower confidence increases openness to external input. The authors further evaluate that confidence also can affect how decision-makers evaluate advisors over time as they tend to perceive advice as more reliable when it aligns with their own views. Moreover, advice-taking is influenced by personal assumptions, meaning that decisions about whether to follow advice are not always based on

quality of the advice itself, but also by individuals' own perceptions, prior beliefs and contextual cues (Bailey et al., 2023).

2.2 Digital Tools and AI in Managerial Work

As digital technologies become more integrated into organizational work, they also shape how managers access, interpret and work with information in everyday practice (Fu & Barbour, 2024). From a *sociomaterial perspective*, technologies are not understood as separate tools that simply support work (Orlikowski, 2007). He argues that organizing is always connected to material elements such as technologies, which means that work cannot be understood as purely social but also material and these dimensions cannot be separated. Instead of treating technology as something used after interpretation, Orlikowski (2007) shows that the social and the material are inherently entangled in practice. This means that technologies are part of how situations are interpreted, influencing what managers notice, what they focus on and how they understand problems. Orlikowski (2010) further developed this perspective by arguing that viewing technology as separate from work is analytically limiting, as it cannot explain how organizational activity unfolds in practice. Instead of existing as an external tool, materiality is embedded in everyday organizing and shapes how activities are carried out.

While Orlikowski emphasizes the inseparability of the *social* and the *material* in organizational practice, Leonardi (2011) draws attention more directly to how managers perceive technology and how these perceptions shape action in everyday work. He emphasizes that technologies create both *affordances*, understood as possibilities for action and *constraints* that shape or limit what can be done. As a result, digital systems influence what managers pay attention to and how situations are interpreted. For example, if a system highlights certain data, managers are more likely to focus on that data while limited visibility may reduce attention to others. Leonardi also argues that technology does not simply operate according to human intentions but possesses "*material agency*" (p.148), meaning that it can shape actions in ways users do not fully control. He describes ongoing interplay between human actions and technological features as *"imbrication"*, where patterns of work emerge and evolve over time through continued interaction. Through this process, organizational routines and technologies are produced, sustained and changed through engagement with technology, rather than remaining fixed (Leonardi, 2011, p. 149). Leonardi (2018) further illustrates how shared digital platforms can foster shared cognition, enabling individuals to develop similar understandings of what is important within the organization.

Artificial intelligence (AI) extends this perspective by introducing technologies that do more than structure access to information. Jarrahi (2018) describes AI as systems that analyze large amounts of data and generate insights to support decision-making, which aligns with the view that technologies actively participate in how organizational work is carried out. Shrestha et al. (2019) show why AI becomes valuable in complex organizational settings, where the volume of information exceeds what managers can process on their own. However, AI does not automatically make managerial decision-making easier or more objective. Davenport & Kirby (2016) highlight that AI is limited in situations requiring contextual understanding, flexibility and human judgment, which is central in managerial work where problems are often ambiguous and not clearly defined. Additionally, Jarrahi (2018) emphasizes that AI should be seen as extending human cognition instead of replacing it. This frames AI as a complementary tool, supporting analysis while leaving interpretation and judgment to the manager. Understanding the relationship between AI support and managerial judgement therefore provides an important basis for examining more advanced forms of AI, such as generative AI and its role in managerial work.

2.2.1 Generative AI as a Source of Advice

Unlike traditional AI, which primarily focuses on classification or prediction, GenAI is designed to generate new outputs that resemble human-created content (Nguyen, 2025; Varshney et al., 2026). Varshney et al. (2026) explains this by comparing generative models to reading many fairy tales and then creating a new story in a similar style. In this sense, GenAI does not simply retrieve existing information, but creates new responses based on what it has learned from previous data. Systems such as ChatGPT or Microsoft Copilot can therefore draft summaries, propose formulations or structure arguments in ways that often appear coherent and human-like, even though these outputs are generated based on probabilities rather than understanding their meaning (Olson, 2024; Varshney et al., 2026).

As existing research often highlights how GenAI helps users in formulating ideas and communication, it becomes important to understand what formulation means. According to Coirier et al. (2002), formulation is the process through which thoughts are turned into structured language. From this perspective, when managers work with AI-generated wording, formulation becomes more than simply putting existing ideas into words. Tversky and Kahneman (1981) further explain that even small variations in formulation can lead to differences in judgment and decision preferences. In their study, participants responded differently to programs described in terms of lives saved versus lives lost, despite the outcomes

being statistically identical. This illustrates that formulation influences not only interpretation, but also evaluation and subsequent decision-making.

Bromage (1970) adds another dimension through the concept of *defensive writing,* arguing that managerial writing is shaped not only by what needs to be said, but by the writer's awareness of how they will be judged by those who read it. Within organizational settings, managers often favor language that appears neutral and professionally safe rather than direct and personal. Similarly, Abreu et al. (2026, p.483) show that different ways of wording the same situation can influence how people understand it, for example, saying "*I didn't have time*" and "*I didn't make time*" can both be used to describe the same goal failure, yet they imply different meanings. The first formulation suggests that external circumstances prevented the action, while the second implies personal choice and responsibility. The authors therefore argue that language does not simply describe reality but also shapes how people perceive and interpret situations. Applied to AI-assisted managerial work, this suggests that AI-generated wording may influence how managers understand organizational situations by subtly directing attention toward particular interpretations, responsibilities or priorities before decisions are even made.

Therefore, this generative capacity also enables GenAI to influence the cognitive processes through which managers interpret information, frame problems and develop decisions during managerial work (Jarrahi et al., 2025; Amrollahi et al., 2026). Dalsgaard (2025) suggests that these systems function as cognitive support, shaping how users frame problems, organizing ideas and developing interpretations. A key reason GenAI functions as a form of advice lies in its ability to synthesize and reorganize unstructured information. A growing body of research has explored that managers operate in environments characterized by fragmented and complex data from multiple sources such as reports, interviews and user feedback. GenAI transforms this information into structured, interpretable outputs, identifying patterns, clustering themes and highlighting key issues. By doing so, it moves beyond merely presenting information and instead offers suggested interpretations and possible directions for action, functioning in ways that resemble human advisory input (Yun et al., 2025; Jarrahi et al., 2025; Johri et al., 2025; Amrollahi et al., 2026).

In writing or planning tasks, systems such as ChatGPT can act as a "*cognitive mediator"*, allowing managers to pause their own thinking, incorporate AI suggestions and continue developing their ideas (Garcés-Manzanera & McBride, 2025). These capabilities show that GenAI outputs function not as final products but as intermediate inputs that shape thinking and guide subsequent actions. This has led GenAI to take on multiple advisory roles, including

brainstormer and interpreter, contributing across different stages of information processing (Jarrahi et al., 2025), indicating that GenAI outputs can actively influence managerial judgment.

At the same time, the advisory role of GenAI is shaped by its limitations where outputs often appear fluent and contextually relevant, yet they can be inaccurate, incomplete or misleading (Yang et al., 2025). Plausibility does not guarantee correctness, which places the responsibility on managers to interpret, validate and adapt AI-generated suggestions instead of treating them as final answers (Jarrahi et al., 2025). This shifts managerial effort away from generating initial content toward verifying, refining and guiding outputs (Memmert et al., 2025). In this way, GenAI functions as a collaborative advisor, supporting decision-making without replacing human judgment and introducing new interpretive demands alongside opportunities for efficiency.

2.3 Sensemaking in Managerial Work

Sensemaking offers a lens for understanding how managers interpret situations and act when clarity is limited or conditions are ambiguous. The perspective moves away from viewing decision-making as a linear process based on complete information and instead focuses on how individuals construct meaning in order to move forward (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). In organizational contexts, sensemaking is described as an ongoing process through which individuals interpret events, build understanding and use it to guide action (Weick et al., 2005). Thus, this view is mainly relevant in managerial work, where ambiguity, interruptions and shifting demands make it difficult to rely on predefined plans. Palmer et al. (2017) emphasize that managers play a central role as interpreters in this process, especially during uncertain or changing conditions. Through communication and framing, managers help define what is happening and how such events should be understood. Managerial work therefore involves not only making decisions but also actively shaping meaning in situations where clarity is limited (Weick et al., 2005).

This study therefore focuses on Weick's (2005) sensemaking theory, specifically four properties that are particularly relevant for understanding how managers engage with GenAI: *Extracted cues, Plausibility, Identity construction and Social context.* Beyond these four properties, the broader sensemaking framework also includes ongoing sensemaking, retrospection, enactment and projective sensemaking. Briefly explained, ongoing sensemaking refers to how interpretations evolve through new events and experiences, while retrospection concerns how individuals make sense of situations by reflecting on them after they occur. Additionally,

enactment highlights how individuals actively shape the environments they later interpret and projective sensemaking focuses on how actors influence and shape the interpretations of others (Palmer et al., 2017; Weick et al., 2005). Although ongoing sensemaking, retrospection, enactment and projective sensemaking are important within the broader sensemaking perspective, they mainly help explain how meaning develops over time through experience, action and social influence (Palmer et al., 2017).

These additional properties are useful for studying longer organizational processes, but they are less suited to the specific focus of this study, which concerns how managers respond to AI-generated advice in everyday situations where interpretation happens quickly and often under uncertainty. This distinction matters because our study is not primarily concerned with how managers' interpretations develop across extended periods, but with what happens in the moment when a manager receives, considers and works with a GenAI suggestion. In such situations, sensemaking becomes visible through what managers notice, what they find plausible, how they understand their own responsibility and how their interpretations are shaped by the people and expectations around them. For this reason, extracted cues, plausibility, identity construction and social context were selected as the most relevant analytical properties. Together, they allow us to examine how managers interpret, evaluate and integrate AI-generated advice as part of day-to-day managerial work.

2.3.1 Extracted Cues

Firstly, a central element of sensemaking is that individuals rely on *selected cues* from their environment when forming an understanding of a situation. Instead of processing all available information, attention is directed toward specific signals that appear meaningful or relevant. These cues can be events, actions or information that stand out and help people make sense of a situation (Weick et al., 2005). In managerial work, where time is limited and information is often incomplete (Kurke & Aldrich, 1983; Wallo & Coetzer, 2023), this selective focus becomes important. Managers must quickly identify what matters most and use these cues to construct an initial understanding that can support action. In situations of organizational change or uncertainty, individuals actively search for cues that help them make sense of what is happening, even when the available information is fragmented, which suggests that interpretation is based on selected elements that are considered sufficient to move forward (Palmer et al., 2022). In the context of GenAI, extracted cues may appear as AI-generated suggestions or structured outputs that managers attend to when trying to understand a situation. Since GenAI can generate new outputs and suggestions beyond the information it was originally

trained on, it may be useful in uncertain situations or where information is incomplete (Bibri & Huang, 2025). These outputs can therefore function as selected cues that help managers identify what appears relevant and form an initial understanding that can support further action.

2.3.2 Plausibility

Secondly, another key aspect of sensemaking is the focus on *plausibility*. Interpretations here are not evaluated primarily based on accuracy, but on whether they are reasonable and coherent enough to support action (Weick et al., 2005). This means that individuals do not wait for complete or verified information before acting. Instead, they construct explanations that appear credible within the situation. Palmer et al. (2017) highlights that managers construct narratives that help make sense of uncertain situations and guide action. This reflects the sensemaking emphasis on plausibility, where *"plausibility rather than accuracy is the ongoing standard that guides learning"* (Weick et al., 2005, p. 419). From this perspective, what matters is therefore not complete accuracy, but whether the interpretation is meaningful enough to guide action.

This perception could be further amplified in the context of GenAI, where AI-generated outputs may appear coherent and convincing even when their accuracy is uncertain. Research shows that users often cannot fully understand how GenAI systems produce their outputs and therefore rely on surface cues such as coherence, consistency and explanations when evaluating the information provided (Alon & Levkovich, 2026). This reliance on surface cues highlights why plausibility plays such a central role in managerial sensemaking. As a result, AI-generated responses may be perceived as credible and meaningful, despite potentially being incorrect or misleading.

2.3.3 Identity Construction

The third property used in this study, *identity construction*, explains that sensemaking is shaped by how individuals understand themselves and their roles within the organization. According to Weick et al. (2005), interpretation is influenced by identity, meaning that individuals make sense of situations in ways that align with their responsibilities, experiences and expectations. For managers, this means that sensemaking is closely connected to their role as decision-makers and coordinators. Palmer et al. (2017) further note that managers are expected to provide direction and clarity, which influences how they interpret and communicate events to others. As a result, the same situation may be understood differently depending on an individual's role and position within the organization. In turn, sensemaking is not purely objective, but shaped by how individuals see themselves in relation to the situation (Weick et al., 2005).

This perspective can also be connected to how managers use AI-generated advice in their everyday work. Even though GenAI can provide suggestions and interpretations, managers still remain responsible for evaluating and adapting the information to the situation. Research shows that human-AI collaboration does not replace human involvement but instead requires users to actively work with and refine the content produced by GenAI systems. Users often add their own "*unique flair and tone*" to make the content more suitable and personalized (Jarrahi et al., 2025, p.15), suggesting that managers do not simply accept GenAI outputs as objective answers, but interpret and adjust them based on their responsibilities.

2.3.4 Social Context

Finally, sensemaking does not occur in isolation but develops through interaction with others, including colleagues and other stakeholders. Through ongoing communication, interpretations are shared, questioned and adjusted, allowing managers and their teams to develop a common understanding of ambiguous situations. Meaning therefore emerges socially and not only through individual interpretation (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014).

Palmer et al. (2017) emphasize that managers act as sensegivers, shaping how situations are understood by framing events and communicating interpretations which in turn also influences how others perceive and respond to situations. However, these interpretations are not necessarily accepted as intended because individuals may understand the same situation differently depending on their experiences and perspectives (Weick et al., 2005; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). When new interpretations arise, shared understandings can change, making sensemaking an ongoing, dynamic process that evolves through interaction and the continuous construction of meaning (Weick et al., 2005). As GenAI becomes more common in managerial work, it is clear that sensemaking extends beyond interaction between people. Therefore, managers may engage with AI-generated suggestions and interpretations as part of ongoing organizational processes and decision-making. Amrollahi et al. (2026) argue that meaning does not exist in the technology itself but emerges through how users interact with it and make sense of it in their social contexts. As a result, the same AI-generated output may be understood in different ways depending on manager's experience, role and perspective. In this sense, GenAI becomes part of broader organizational processes where knowledge is "*co-generated, refined and applied*" within organizations (Amrollahi et al., 2026, p. 2).

2.4 Chapter Summary

We have so far explored theoretical perspectives relevant to understanding how managers engage with GenAI as part of everyday managerial work. The chapter first highlighted managerial work as shaped by ambiguity, where managers rely on communication, interpretation and external input when making decisions. Building on this, advice-taking was discussed as an interpretive process in which managers actively evaluate, negotiate and integrate advice under conditions of uncertainty. Furthermore, we examined how digital technologies and AI systems shape managerial practices. Within this context, GenAI was presented as a form of advisory support that can structure information, generate suggestions and influence how managers formulate problems and interpret situations. At the same time, the literature emphasized that AI-generated outputs are not inherently objective or reliable, making managerial judgment central when working with GenAI in practice. Finally, sensemaking was introduced as the main theoretical lens of the study through the four properties of extracted cues, plausibility, identity construction and social context, which were presented as relevant for understanding how managers interpret and engage with AI-generated advice in managerial situations. Together, these perspectives provide the theoretical foundation for analyzing how managers make sense of GenAI in everyday organizational contexts.

3. Methodology

This chapter presents the methodological choices that guided the study. It begins by outlining the research philosophy, including the study's constructionist ontology, interpretivist epistemology and symbolic interactionist lens. It then explains the abductive research approach, exploratory research design and qualitative strategy. The chapter further describes the data collection process, including purposive sampling and semi-structured interviews, followed by the analytical process from sorting to arguing. Finally, methodological limitations and the use of GenAI during the research process are addressed. Relevant methodological material is presented in the appendices, including the interview guide and consent procedure (Appendix A–B), thematic coding (Appendix C) and AI prompts used during the writing process (Appendix D).

3.1 Research Philosophy

To ensure alignment between the purpose of the study and the methodological choices made throughout the research process, a clear research philosophy is important. Accordingly, this study reflects on *ontology,* which concerns the nature of reality, simply *"what can be known"* and *epistemology,* which relates to how knowledge of that reality is created and understood, simply *"ways of knowing, how we know what we know, and who can be a knower"* (Bell et al., 2021; Berryman, 2019, p. 272). Within ontology, realism assumes that social reality exists independently of human interpretation, whereas constructionism views reality as socially constructed through interaction and interpretation (Snape & Spencer, 2014). This study adopts constructionist ontology, recognizing that managers' understandings and experiences of GenAI are shaped by their individual contexts, prior experiences and interactions.

From an epistemological perspective, the study follows an interpretivist approach, which assumes that knowledge is developed through subjective meanings and interpretations rather than objective observation alone (Snape & Spencer, 2014). From this perspective, reality is not something fixed or generally observable, it is socially constructed through interactions, experiences and meanings shaped by cultural and historical contexts (Bell et al., 2021). Interpretivist researchers seek to understand how individuals perceive and make sense of their experiences from their own perspectives, acknowledging that the meanings people develop through experience influence how they understand and respond to the world around them (Bell et al., 2021). As Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018, p.12) suggest, interpretive research often begins by looking at familiar phenomena and asking questions such as "*What is going on here?*"

and "*What does it mean?*". In the context of this study, these questions became relevant in understanding how managers interpret, evaluate and make sense of GenAI in their everyday managerial work.

This perspective contrasts with positivism, which assumes that reality exists independently of human perception and can be studied through objective and measurable methods (Bell et al., 2021). Positivism is less suitable for this study, as the focus lies on how managers subjectively interpret and make sense of their interactions with GenAI. Our philosophical position therefore aligns with the purpose of the study, which is to understand how managers interpret, evaluate and make sense of GenAI in their daily work practices. It is further consistent with sensemaking theory, which emphasizes how individuals construct meaning through interpretation and interaction in situations characterized by ambiguity and uncertainty (Weick et al., 2005).

Building on the interpretivist perspective, symbolic interactionism provides a useful lens for examining how managers interpret their interactions with GenAI. Symbolic interactionism is about understanding how people create meanings through their interactions with others and with their surroundings (Blumer, 1969). It assumes that objects, events and technologies do not have fixed meanings by themselves but are interpreted differently based on individuals´ experiences, roles and social contexts. As Prasad (2018, p. 26) states, "*Organizational phenomena only come to life in and through these interpretations and have little existential standing outside them*". In the context of this study, it means that GenAI is not understood as having a fixed or objective meaning. Instead, its meaning and relevance is shaped through managers' interpretations, experiences and interactions within their organization. Grounding the study in constructionist ontology, interpretivist epistemology and the lens of symbolic interactionism creates a philosophical foundation that aligns closely with the purpose of the research and the methodological choices made throughout the study.

3.2 Research Approach

To clarify the relationship between theory and empirical data, it is necessary to choose an analytical strategy that describes how theory is used throughout the research process, whether it serves as a starting point, emerges from the data or develops alongside it (Lind, 2019).

The three main ideal-typical research approaches are deductive, inductive and abductive approaches. A deductive approach begins with existing theory and develops hypotheses that are tested through empirical observations, whereas an inductive approach starts with empirical data from which theoretical insights are generated. In contrast, an abductive approach involves a

continuous interaction between theory and empirical data, where theory helps interpret the data, while the empirical findings, in turn, contribute to reshaping the theory. This allows the researcher to move back and forth between theory and empirical data to develop a deeper understanding of the phenomenon studied (Bell et al., 2021; Lind, 2019; Saunders et al., 2006).

Given the aim of this study to explore how managers make sense of and engage with GenAI in their everyday work, an *abductive approach* was considered the most appropriate. The study is informed by sensemaking theory, particularly four properties relevant to managerial interactions with GenAI: Extracted cues, Plausibility, Identity construction and Social context. These properties provide a useful framework for understanding how managers interpret uncertainty, evaluate AI-generated suggestions and construct meaning in organizational contexts. However, instead of applying the theory in a strict manner, the study remains open to managers' own experiences and interpretations of GenAI in practice. Sensemaking theory therefore serves as a guiding framework while allowing empirical insights to shape and deepen the understanding of how these properties are reflected in managerial work.

3.3 Research Design & Strategy

In line with Bell et al. (2021), a research design functions as an overall plan for how a study is carried out, including how empirical data is collected, analyzed and interpreted. It is strongly connected to the research philosophy and helps ensure consistency between the study's theoretical perspective and methodological decisions. Bell et al. (2021) further explain that research design should not be confused with research methods, as the design represents the overall structure and direction of the study, while the methods refer to the specific techniques used to gather and analyze data. As this study aims to explore how managers interpret and make sense of GenAI in their everyday work, an exploratory research design was considered most suitable. Bell et al. (2021) explain that *exploratory research* is particularly appropriate when studying complex or relatively underexplored phenomena where existing knowledge is still limited. Since the use of GenAI in managerial work is still evolving, this design enabled a deeper understanding of managers' experiences, reflections and interpretations related to AI-generated advice.

Based on the exploratory nature of the study and the focus on managers' subjective experiences and interpretations, it became important to adopt a research strategy capable of capturing rich and nuanced insights. In this regard, research strategies are commonly divided into quantitative and qualitative approaches, which represent different ways of understanding and conducting

research (Denscombe, 2018). While quantitative research is often associated with scientific methods, including hypothesis testing and generalization, qualitative research instead focuses on understanding meanings and the ways individuals make sense of their social realities through rich descriptions and emergent concepts or theories (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). Our study therefore adopts a qualitative research approach, which according to Saunders et al. (2006) is based on experiences and interpretations through non-numerical data, allowing researchers to gain deeper insights into social phenomena. Although qualitative research is often based on smaller samples and therefore has limited generalizability (Denscombe, 2018), the purpose of this study was to generate deeper understanding instead of broad statistical conclusions.

3.4 Data Collection

To better understand how managers make sense of and engage with GenAI as a source of advice in their everyday work, semi-structured interviews were conducted with managers actively using GenAI in their professional roles. The participants represented different organizational contexts, including healthcare, production, technology, legal advisory work and institutional care, allowing the study to capture a range of experiences and perspectives related to managerial use of GenAI. In the following sub-chapters, we describe how the participants were selected and how the interviews were conducted.

3.4.1 Purposive Sampling for Qualitative Data

Sampling refers to the process of selecting participants or cases from a broader population to generate data relevant to the research purpose. The choice of sampling strategy is closely connected to the overall research design and methodological approach of the study (Ahmad & Wilkins, 2025). For this study, a non-probability sampling method was applied, specifically purposive sampling, as it allowed participants to be selected based on their relevance to the research topic (Ahmad & Wilkins; Denscombe, 2018). Since the aim of the study was to understand how managers work with and relate to GenAI as a source of advice, it was important to speak with individuals who actively use GenAI in their everyday managerial work, particularly in situations involving guidance, support or decision-making. Our aim was not to focus on general attitudes toward GenAI, but instead to recruit managers who could reflect on concrete experiences of interacting with AI-generated advice in practice.

The recruitment process took place through personal networks and LinkedIn, where managers from different professional environments were contacted. The participants represented a range of organizational contexts, including healthcare, production, technology, legal advisory work

and institutional care. This variation allowed the study to capture different managerial experiences and perspectives related to the use of GenAI across organizational settings shaped by different responsibilities, structures and professional expectations. At the same time, recurring patterns emerged in how managers reflected on issues related to trust, judgment and responsibility when working with AI-generated advice.

Our initial ambition was to recruit at least eight participants for the study, however, the recruitment process proved to be more challenging than expected. Several managers who initially expressed interest later cancelled their participation, while others explained that they did not feel comfortable discussing their use of GenAI in a professional context. Some participants also stated that they did not actively use GenAI within their workplace, which limited their relevance to the study's focus.

Although a snowball effect, where existing participants recommend additional participants through their own networks, had been hoped for during the recruitment process (Denscombe, 2018), this did not occur to any greater extent. Unlike topics that participants may discuss more openly within their networks, the use of GenAI in managerial work appeared to be perceived as relatively sensitive or uncertain, which may have reduced participants' willingness to recommend others or speak openly about their own use. We have understanding and respect for this hesitation, as managers often carry organizational responsibility and may therefore view the use of GenAI not only as an individual work practice, but as something connected to broader organizational policies and expectations where managers may feel responsible for ensuring that GenAI is used appropriately. As a result, recruitment relied primarily on direct outreach through personal networks and LinkedIn.

Despite these challenges, our final sample consisted of seven managers with diverse professional backgrounds and varying levels of engagement with GenAI systems. Of the final seven participants, five were men and two were women. Although this gender distribution could have been interesting to explore further, it was not examined in greater depth due to the limited scope and timeframe of the study. While the sample size was smaller than originally intended, the interviews generated rich and reflective empirical material closely connected to the study's purpose. Given the exploratory and interpretive nature of the study, the participants provided depth to develop insights into how managers make sense of and work with AI-generated advice in practice. An overview of the interview participants is presented in Table 2.

Table 2
Summary of interviews participants

Participant	Age	Role	Sector/Industry
Adam	53	Unit manager	Laboratory
Ben	63	Production manager	Manufacturing
Chris	32	Unit manager	Healthcare
Dan	55	Unit manager	Public sector
Emma	36	Program Lead	Technology
Fiona	30	Unit manager	Municipal care
Gabriel	31	Business manager	Legal/Business services

3.4.2 Semi-Structured Interviews

Since the purpose of this study is to develop a deeper understanding of managers' interpretations and use of GenAI, personal face-to-face interviews were considered the most suitable method for collecting rich and detailed empirical data (Denscombe, 2017). To collect our empirical data, we conducted interviews with managers using GenAI in their professional work. Interviews are valuable in qualitative research because they provide insight into participants lived experiences, reflections and interpretations of their social reality (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). This made interviews suitable for the study, as they allowed us to explore how managers experience and make sense of working with GenAI in everyday managerial contexts. More specifically, we conducted semi-structured interviews, which allowed the conversations to follow common themes connected to the purpose of the study while still giving participants the flexibility to reflect openly on their own experiences and perspectives (Bryman et al., 2008; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2019). Within an interpretivist and symbolic interactionist perspective, semi-structured interviews are valuable because they allow researchers to explore how individuals interpret and construct meaning through their experiences and interactions (Prasad, 2018).

In our interview guide, we developed a set of guiding questions connected to the purpose of the study and the theoretical framework. The questions were designed around the four selected

sensemaking properties, which served as a guiding framework throughout the interviews focusing on how managers evaluated, integrated and interpreted their work with GenAI. Alongside the guiding questions, follow-up questions were used to further explore participants' reflections, experiences and examples when relevant. As Ritchie and Lewis (2003) explain, follow-up questions and probes are important in semi-structured interviews because they allow researchers to explore issues in greater depth while still giving participants flexibility in how they express their experiences. However, the conversations were not strictly limited to the interview guide. Instead, the managers were encouraged to speak freely and elaborate on the situations, experiences and narratives they considered important. This encouragement created conversations that were both structured and flexible, allowing for deeper insights into how managers make sense of and engage with GenAI in practice.

The interviews lasted approximately 30–50 minutes and were conducted face-to-face through Microsoft Teams, based on the participants' preferences and availability. Before each interview, participants were informed about the purpose of the study, as well as the confidentiality and consent procedures. Verbal consent was obtained from all participants prior to the start of the recording. The interviews were audio recorded solely for analytical purposes and only the research team had access to the material. Participants were informed that all information would be treated confidentially and anonymized throughout the study. Anonymity means that participants' identities in this sense remain unknown outside the research team, while confidentiality ensures that participants cannot be directly or indirectly identified through their comments (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). They were also informed that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time. To further protect participants' identities while still maintaining a more natural and engaging presentation of the empirical material, all interviewees were assigned fictional names in the thesis. Since all interviews were conducted in Swedish to allow participants to express themselves more naturally and comfortably, the original Swedish interview guide, introductory formalities and consent procedure are presented in *Appendix A*, while the English-translated versions are provided in *Appendix B*.

3.5 Data Analysis from Sorting to Arguing

"It is the goal of all interpretive traditions to understand these processes of subjective reality construction in all walks of social life" (Prasad, 2018, p. 14). From this perspective, individuals continuously create meaning through their everyday experiences, interactions and interpretations within what Prasad describes as the "*lebenswelt"* (lifeworld). To further explore and interpret these meaning-making processes within the empirical material, the study followed

Rennstam & Wästerfors' (2018) analytical approach "*from sorting to arguing"*. Our analysis therefore focused not only on what participants said, but also on how they reflected upon, interpreted and described their experiences of working with GenAI throughout the interviews.

The first stage of the analytical process involved sorting the empirical material. According to Rennstam & Wästerfors (2018), sorting refers to the process of creating structure and order within qualitative data by identifying common patterns, themes and meaningful content within the empirical material. Following the interviews, all audio recordings were transcribed using Klang AI to transform the conversations into written empirical material suitable for analysis. As the interviews were originally conducted in Swedish, the transcriptions were later translated into English using DeepL to ensure a high level of linguistic accuracy. However, since automated translations may overlook contextual meanings or linguistic nuances, all translated material was carefully reviewed and adjusted manually while comparing it to the original recordings and transcripts. This process helped ensure that the translated material accurately reflected the participants' intended meanings and expressions while also improving readability and consistency throughout the empirical material.

Once the transcriptions had been finalized, the material was read several times to develop a close familiarity with the data and gain a broader understanding of the managers' reflections. As Rennstam & Wästerfors (2018) emphasize, sorting qualitative material is not merely a process of thinking about the data, but a practical and continuous activity where the researcher repeatedly reads, compares and reorganizes the material to identify meaningful patterns and categories. During this process, patterns, similarities and contrasting perspectives connected to the four selected sensemaking properties were identified and grouped together. This made it possible to organize the data into thematic categories related to how managers interpreted, evaluated and made sense of GenAI in their everyday managerial work (Appendix C). Throughout the sorting process, both of us worked collaboratively in extensive analytical sessions conducted through Microsoft Teams, where the empirical material was reviewed together using shared screens. This enabled ongoing discussions, comparisons and reflections around emerging categorizations throughout the analysis. Working closely together throughout the process helped ensure a shared understanding of the empirical material while allowing analytical decisions to be discussed and refined together.

Following the sorting process, the analysis gradually moved into a phase of reducing the empirical material. Rennstam & Wästerfors (2018) describe reduction as a process of narrowing down and prioritizing the parts of the empirical material considered most relevant for the

purpose of the study. At the same time, they emphasize that "*reductions are never definitive*" (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2015, p. 123), highlighting how qualitative analysis remains iterative and open to reinterpretation throughout the analytical process. Although sorting and reducing partly overlapped throughout the analysis, this phase involved a clearer prioritization of which parts of the empirical material would become central in the final interpretation. While the initial sorting process was guided by the four selected sensemaking properties, the continued comparison and reduction of the material also revealed an emerging theme extending beyond the original theoretical framework. Since this theme repeatedly appeared across several interviews and reflections, it gradually became analytically important within the final analysis.

The final stage of the analytical process involved arguing. As Rennstam & Wästerfors (2018, p. 143) emphasize, "*creating order and deciding what to use and not to use is not enough. The analyst also needs to say something*". In this stage, the focus therefore shifted from organizing and reducing the empirical material toward interpreting and developing analytical interpretations and theoretical arguments based on the identified themes and patterns. Rather than only describing the managers' reflections and experiences, the empirical material was interpreted in relation to the study's theoretical framework and research purpose. Throughout the analysis, empirical excerpts and recurring reflections were compared with theoretical concepts, allowing theory and empirical material to interact throughout the interpretive process. In line with the abductive approach adopted in the study, the analysis therefore moved back and forth between empirical data and theoretical interpretation to gradually refine the study´s analytical arguments and develop a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. During the arguing stage, the emerging theme identified throughout the reduction process became very important in the interpretation of the empirical material. Since the theme repeatedly appeared across several interviews and in relation to multiple sensemaking properties, it developed into a central part of the analysis. This allowed the study to move beyond the initial theoretical framework and remain open to new interpretations emerging directly from the managers' reflections and experiences.

3.6 Reflections on Methodological Limitations

Since the study is grounded in an interpretivist and constructionist perspective, the findings should be understood as context-dependent interpretations of how managers experienced and approached GenAI within their organizational settings, rather than as universally generalizable truths (Bell et al., 2021; Snape & Spencer, 2014). The analysis was therefore shaped by the specific organizations and individuals included in the study, as well as by our own

interpretations throughout the research process, meaning that other researchers may have approached parts of the material differently (Bell et al., 2021). Reflecting on these methodological considerations is therefore important to create transparency regarding how the findings were produced and interpreted (Sepulveda-Pacsi & Dobson, 2026).

As the study was based entirely on interview data, the findings were shaped by the ways participants chose to talk about their experiences of using GenAI within their everyday work. The interviews created space for managers to reflect on how they approached the technology, how they reasoned around responsibility and professional judgement, as well as how they navigated uncertainty connected to GenAI in organizational settings, which aligns with qualitative interviewing aimed at understanding how individuals interpret their experiences (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2019). At the same time, interview accounts are always influenced by context and interaction, meaning that participants may consciously or unconsciously present themselves in ways that appear reasonable or professionally appropriate (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007; Denzin, 2017). This became noticeable in discussions related to organizational expectations surrounding GenAI, where several participants appeared cautious in how they formulated certain reflections. In this sense, the hesitation itself became analytically meaningful, as it reflected some of the uncertainty that still appears to surround the use of GenAI within managerial work.

The same uncertainty also shaped the recruitment process where several managers initially expressed interest in participating but later chose not to take part in the study, while others appeared hesitant before agreeing to an interview. As Denscombe (2018) notes, participants' willingness to openly discuss experiences can be influenced by how sensitive they perceive a topic to be. The empirical material may therefore to some extent reflect the perspectives of managers who felt relatively comfortable discussing GenAI in a professional setting, while perspectives from managers who were more skeptical toward GenAI or worked under stricter organizational policies may have become less visible within the findings.

Although the study included managers from different industries and organizational settings, the sample consisted of seven participants in total. A broader sample could potentially have contributed additional perspectives on managerial use of GenAI across different organizational contexts. At the same time, the relatively limited number of participants made it possible to conduct longer and more in-depth conversations, creating space for participants to discuss experiences and uncertainties in greater detail, which is central in qualitative interviewing (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2019). Additional empirical sources, such as observations or workplace

interactions, could also potentially have contributed to a broader understanding of how GenAI was enacted in practice. The inclusion of multiple forms of empirical material, so-called *methodological triangulation*, may therefore have strengthened the trustworthiness of the findings (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003; Sepulveda-Pacsi & Dobson, 2026).

All interviews were conducted digitally, which shaped the interview situation in different ways. The online format made it possible to include managers from different geographical locations and organizational contexts, while also creating flexibility in relation to participants' schedules. At the same time, digital interviews may limit access to certain non-verbal expressions and interpersonal dynamics that can contribute to deeper interpretation in qualitative interviews (Vogl, 2013). Although facial expressions, tone of voice and visible reactions could still be observed throughout the conversations, certain reactions and moments of hesitation may have been more difficult to fully interpret through a screen.

3.7 Use of Generative AI

The interviews were transcribed using the transcription tool Klang.ai, after which the transcripts were manually reviewed and refined to ensure accuracy. ChatGPT and Grammarly were used throughout the writing process to improve sentence structure, identify spelling or grammatical errors and enhance the overall clarity of the thesis. AI tools were only used to support and refine text that had already been written by us, meaning they were not used for generating empirical findings, conducting analysis or interpreting the data. The prompts used during the writing process are presented in Appendix D. Interestingly, while this thesis explored how managers turn to GenAI as a source of advice, we also found ourselves doing something similar throughout the writing process. Although the analysis and interpretations remained our own, we occasionally turned to GenAI to bounce ideas off, work through uncertainty and help move discussions forward when we felt stuck. Perhaps that says something about how easily GenAI can quietly move from being just a tool into becoming part of how uncertainty is managed in practice.

3.8 Chapter Summary

This chapter presented the methodological choices guiding the study and explained how they aligned with the aim of understanding how managers make sense of and work with GenAI in everyday managerial practice. Grounded in a constructionist ontology and an interpretivist epistemology, the study approached managers' experiences of GenAI as shaped by how they understood and used the technology within their everyday work. Symbolic interactionism

further helped explain how these understandings were influenced by managers' interactions, roles and organizational environments. To explore these experiences, the study adopted an exploratory qualitative approach with an abductive orientation, allowing theory and empirical material to develop alongside one another throughout the research process. Empirical data was collected through semi-structured interviews with seven managers from different organizational settings who actively used GenAI in their professional work.

The chapter also described the analytical process inspired by Rennstam and Wästerfors' (2018) approach "*from sorting to arguing*", where the empirical material was interpreted in relation to the study's purpose and theoretical framework. In addition, the chapter reflected methodological considerations related to interpretation, recruitment and digital interviewing. We lastly clarified how GenAI tools were used to support transcription and language refinement, while all analytical interpretations and conclusions remained our own.

4. Empirical Findings

This chapter presents the empirical findings from the interviews through four sensemaking properties: Extracted cues, Plausibility, Identity construction and Social context. Across the interviews, GenAI was described as deeply embedded in managerial work, though not in a simple way. Managers used GenAI for drafting, structuring, orientation, idea generation and reflection, while at the same time drawing boundaries around where its role should end. Alongside the four sensemaking properties, an emerging theme was identified: Hidden influence in formulation and the lack of clear structure. To provide a clear overview of the managers' experiences and support a transparent analysis, the empirical material was coded according to recurring themes identified throughout the interviews, as illustrated in Appendix C.

4.1 Extracted Cues

Within the sensemaking perspective, extracted cues refer to how individuals notice and interpret signals in situations characterized by uncertainty (Weick, 2005). In the context of managerial use of GenAI, managers described using the technology to orient themselves in situations where direction was unclear or where they lacked sufficient knowledge to move work forward confidently. GenAI was mainly used in the earlier stages of work processes, where it provided overviews, starting points and possible directions that helped managers navigate uncertain situations.

4.1.1 Orientation and Possible directions

Adam works as a unit manager in a laboratory setting within healthcare, where he is responsible for staffing, daily operations and ongoing development. His role requires him to ensure that the unit functions smoothly, often by coordinating people, resources and administrative tasks at the same time. When he talks about GenAI, he connects it directly to that situation:

> *"Ehhh… fundamentally, it is a tool that allows me to do more with less effort… If I were to do these tasks without AI's help, it would take me longer or require that I had other people who could take on these things." – (Adam, Unit Manager in a laboratory)*

What he describes can first be understood as a matter of saving time. But if we stay with how he explains it, the situation becomes more specific because the options he outlines are either to spend more time himself or to involve other people. GenAI appears at this point as a way of handling the task without doing either. Instead of sharing the work or delaying it, he is able to

move forward directly. At first, it can seem like a question of efficiency, however we read it as something more than that because GenAI changes how the situation is handled. Rather than redistributing the task or extending the time spent on it, Adam can continue on his own. In that sense, GenAI becomes part of how the work is made manageable in the moment. A similar pattern appears in Ben´s account, although in a different kind of situation. Ben works as a production manager in a growing company, where he is responsible for coordinating teams and contributing to decisions that often extend beyond his immediate area of expertise. His role requires him to move between different topics, sometimes without having full knowledge of the issue at hand. When he describes using GenAI before meetings, he puts it like this:

> *"It is mostly about getting an overall picture… so that I can discuss certain things that might come up in the meeting, things I am not fully knowledgeable about."*- (*Ben, Production manager in manufacturing*)

At this stage, the concern is about not being completely lost where we understand it as GenAI helping him move from not knowing to knowing enough to participate giving him a way into the situation. In contrast to Adam, who uses GenAI to handle tasks on his own, Ben uses it to position himself in relation to others. In both cases, however, GenAI appears at a point where something is still unclear and needs to be worked through. As we continue working through the material, we begin to see more clearly what kind of support GenAI provides in these situations not simply helping managers move forward but also shapes how they do so. This becomes particularly visible in how they handle what GenAI produces. Ben describes this when talking about writing tasks:

> *"Sometimes it can be good to start from a blank page. But often, to save time, for example when writing a job description or some kind of instruction or training guide, I think you can put in some questions and then you get examples. And those examples, you have to question the content. But the structure, how it is laid out, is often very good."- (Ben, Production Manager in manufacturing)*

What he points toward here is not only a difference between structure and content, but a difference in how they are used. Rather than treating the output as something to either accept or reject, he works with it in parts. When we look at these situations together, it helps clarify what the starting point provided by GenAI consists of where it is not primarily finished content, but a way of organizing the task. What becomes clear is that structure is seen as a practical entry point where it gives the manager something to work with, even when the content is uncertain.

Instead of beginning from nothing, he begins with a structure that can be adjusted, corrected and filled in. This helps explain why GenAI remains useful even when its output is not fully trusted. We interpret that what matters is not that everything is correct, but that it provides a workable way into the task. A similar use appears in Gabriel's account, who works as a business manager while also providing legal advisory services to clients. In his role, he moves between managerial responsibilities and specialized legal work. When he describes GenAI, he puts it like this:

> *"I see AI positively in the function it has today, as a very advanced search tool. You quickly get an overview and can find what you are looking for much faster than through a regular search."- (Gabriel, Business Manager in legal and business services)*

What stands out here is how he frames GenAI less as a source of answers and more as a way of quickly accessing an overview. In his situation, where he works across both managerial and legal tasks, this allows him to orient himself efficiently without having to search through multiple sources. We interpret this as another example of how GenAI functions as an entry point into a task, providing something to begin with rather than something final to rely on. In other situations, the uncertainty is not about how to begin, but about which direction to take once the work is already underway. This becomes visible in the account of Emma, who works as a program lead in a large global technology company. In her role, she is responsible for coordinating and driving initiatives that often cut across different teams. Her work involves developing ideas, aligning different stakeholders and moving projects forward in situations where there is no single clear solution from the outset. Rather than following predefined processes, she often has to explore possible directions and decide which ones are worth pursuing. She describes using AI in the following way:

> *"I mainly use it for idea generation. Like, give me different kinds of ideas for how we can solve this project. Often it can come up with alternatives that I did not have myself. It can brainstorm and I can push it quite hard. Give me twenty different ways to solve this. Give me twenty more. Give me twenty more. And if I push it hard enough, then I can see, okay, here was something, here was something. So it can generate quite a lot of insight, but I would absolutely never just go with that. I treat it as a data pump for possible ways of doing things." – (Emma, Program Lead in the technology sector)*

In our interpretation, her way of working with GenAI shows that the value does not lie in any single suggestion, but in having many alternatives to work with. Rather than moving toward one answer, she expands the range of possible directions available to her. For us, this can be seen as a form of advice, but not in the traditional sense. Instead of pointing toward what should be done, GenAI provides multiple possible ways forward without prioritizing them. She does not follow the suggestions directly but works through them to see what stands out. We see a tension here where GenAI expands the range of possibilities without necessarily making the situation clearer or easier to resolve. The system generates multiple directions and suggestions, but the manager must still interpret what seems relevant, useful or appropriate in relation to the specific situation. The output becomes something to work with rather than rely on while responsibility for selecting, interpreting and deciding remains with her as a manager.

4.2 Plausibility

According to Weick (2005), plausibility in sensemaking is not primarily about finding objective truth, but about constructing interpretations that are reasonable enough to allow action to continue. As we continue working through the interviews, we turn our attention to what happens once something has been produced. The managers now have something in front of them to read and respond to, but even at this point, uncertainty does not disappear, as the outputs are not described as something they either fully trust or reject. Instead, they come back to whether it gives them something they can work with in the situation they are in. At the same time, they are aware that what they are working with may not be fully reliable. We understand this as a tension within their use where they choose to use the output since it helps them move forward, even though they know that it may not be entirely correct.

4.2.1 Useful but uncertain

A common pattern across the interviews was that managers described GenAI as highly useful, while remaining aware that the output could be inaccurate or misleading. The output was often seen as convincing and easy to work with, which made critical evaluation more demanding in practice. This tension becomes visible in Adam's account when he talks about GenAI:

> *"There is this hallucination effect, that sometimes AI writes things because it sounds like something it would say. There is a problem there in being able to control the truthfulness, because it is so convenient, it looks good, it is neat, but in reality, you have someone lying straight to your face. And if you ask, "Can I use this equipment for this?" it can say, yes absolutely, but no, that is not true at*

all. So, it is important what you yourself say and what you want it to do. If you ask very open questions, you have to be extremely skeptical about what comes out (Adam, Unit Manager in a laboratory)

We interpret his reflection as one where being critical becomes more demanding choosing to use GenAI because it is useful, but at the same time, he has to question something that presents itself as if it were reliable. With Chris, that works as a unit manager in a hospital setting, where he is responsible for coordinating staff and keeping daily operations running, the difficulty appears in a more subtle way. He explains it like this:

"AI is not neutral. If you keep interacting with it, there is a risk that you get pulled into a perspective it creates. Each response may seem reasonable on its own, but over time you can drift further away from reality without noticing it". – (Chris, Unit Manager in healthcare)

In his context, where work needs to move forward, this can become difficult because, from our viewpoint, the plausibility of each response encourages him to continue with what seems to make sense and may make it harder to notice when something is wrong.

4.2.2 Contextual judgment

While some managers emphasized the uncertainty of GenAI output, others focused more on the importance of evaluating the output through their own professional understanding and situational awareness. Emma describes this in the following way:

"Does it align with my knowledge? Does it align with my training, my competence? Does it align with my experience? Would this land well in this context? You always have to contextualize it."- (Emma, Program Lead in the technology sector)

She repeatedly brings the focus back to her own experience where the output is not taken as it is, but compared to what she already knows and the situation she is working in. We interpret this as an active way of evaluating the output whereas whether it is useful depends on whether it fits her understanding of the context. The output does not stand on its own but becomes something she has to work through before deciding how to use it and this is why we read her use of AI as something that requires ongoing judgment. While Emma emphasizes evaluating the output through her own experience, another manager describes working with it in relation to multiple sources of input. This becomes visible in Fiona's account. Fiona, a unit manager in

municipal LSS services, is responsible for several care facilities and has a highly mobile role centered around meetings, ranging from staff management and financial oversight to coordination with healthcare actors. She often works independently across different locations, with limited day-to-day access to colleagues. Despite this, she still expresses a clear need to involve others when facing uncertainty, rather than relying on GenAI alone:

> *"If I feel uncertain about a situation and do not know how to move forward, then I might ask GenAI, ask two colleagues for example, and gather a kind of assessment. Then I make the judgment based on what I have received. Just because it says one thing to me does not mean that it is what determines my decision. I take in information from different directions, and that is what shapes the final judgment I make in the end. I do not stare blindly at the information that comes from that particular source."- (Fiona, Unit Manager in municipal care)*

We see that plausibility here is not assumed, but actively constructed through triangulation, as GenAI's input is weighted against colleagues' perspectives and personal judgment rather than accepted without questioning. In our view, this reduces the risk of blind reliance and shows that the manager's work involves continuously evaluating situations and the credibility of GenAI interpretations. Fiona also expresses this setting in a more explicit way when she reflects on her level of trust in GenAI:

> *"I would say I trust AI… about 80%. Enough to use it in my work."- (Fiona, Unit Manager in municipal care)*

This can be understood as trust that is not complete, where GenAI is seen as useful enough to work with, but not something to fully depend on. At the same time, we see that it is neither a matter of blind trust nor full verification before use. Rather, managers appear to use AI-generated suggestions in a pragmatic way, relying on them when they seem reasonable while remaining aware that they may still be inaccurate and therefore open to questioning or revising them. Managers thus operate in a middle ground, where the output does not need to be certain, but sufficiently usable to act on while remaining open to correction.

4.3 Identity Construction

Sensemaking is closely connected to identity, as individuals interpret situations in ways that are consistent with how they understand themselves and their roles (Weick, 2005). So, as we move further into the interviews, the way the managers talk about GenAI begins to shift. The focus is no longer only on what it helps them do, the third pattern is now on how they place themselves

in relation to it. Even when they rely on it in some sense, they repeatedly defend their own role as decision-makers and accountable actors. This makes it clear that GenAI use is not only practical, but also identity relevant. Managers need to be able to use the tool without feeling that it replaces them.

4.3.1 Maintaining responsibility

A way managers maintain their role as responsible decision-makers is by drawing a clear line between support and decision-making. Chris makes this particularly clear:

> *"What I never do and what we are also encouraged not to do, is let AI make the decisions. And ask it for the decision. The decision has to be mine. The way I use it is more that once the decision has already been made, then it is made, it cannot be changed, and then I use it for formulations and similar things." - (Chris, Unit Manager in healthcare)*

What we notice here is how clearly he separates these moments where GenAI is part of the work, but not part of the decision itself. What he does here is keep the decision closely tied to his role by deciding where AI is allowed to enter. Emma describes a similar boundary, but her way of talking about it takes a slightly different direction:

> *"There is a risk if you blindly trust what AI says. Because in the end, if I am going to make a decision, then I am the one who is answerable for it. I am answerable for how I interpret the AI data. I am the one responsible for my decision and the consequences of that decision. You cannot say, "Well, AI said so" No, it is still the manager who is responsible. How I interpret AI's information is my responsibility. And if I am going to make a decision, then I have to be able to stand for it."- (Emma, Program Lead in the technology sector)*

Instead of focusing on when AI is used, she shifts attention toward responsibility after the decision has been made. What stands out to us is how strongly she connects decision-making to being answerable for the outcome, where the decision is not only about making a choice, but also about being able to stand for that choice afterward. We therefore interpret her emphasis on accountability as a way of maintaining her professional identity as a responsible decision-maker. In this sense, the boundary appears relatively clear, as both decision-making and responsibility remain tied to the manager and to how she understands her role.

4.3.2 Ownership becomes less straightforward

However, when we look more closely at what GenAI contributes, this clarity begins to change, as we can see for example in Adams' reflection when he talks about what AI allows him to produce:

> *"I would say that now you can do things you are not educated to do, things you do not actually know that much about. You can produce texts, films, material and other things that are extremely professional and impressive even though you do not actually have the underlying knowledge or ability to do that thing. That creates a worry that people will not develop these abilities in the future. – (Adam, Unit Manager in a laboratory)*

What he points to is the difference between how something appears and what it is based on. The output can look finished and convincing, even when it is not fully grounded in his own knowledge. This matters in his situation because the output is not only something he reads, but something he is expected to stand behind. Even if the text appears complete, he knows that he does not fully control what it is based on. For us, this goes beyond a question of quality, it raises the issue of how he can relate to the output. He remains responsible for it, but the link to his own knowledge becomes less direct and this is where the sense of ownership becomes less straightforward. The work is still his, however the connection between what he knows and what he is responsible for becomes less direct, which makes it less clear what he is standing behind. Gabriel points to a similar tension but expresses it in relation to how he presents himself in his work. He explains it like this:

> *"I work with text, especially argumentative text, so I write by myself. I do not think AI uses the Swedish language in the right way. I cannot come across as a youthful, hip-hop type of person. I need to be more like a man with a cane, hat and tie."- (Gabriel, Business Manager in legal and business services)*

What becomes visible here is that ownership is not only about understanding the content, but also about how it is expressed. The way something is written is tied to how he presents himself professionally. Even if GenAI can produce text, it does not necessarily align with that identity, instead we interpret this as a way in which managers maintain ownership, by keeping control over how they appear through their work. Dan, who works within Swedish National Board of Institutional Care (SiS), describes another way of working with GenAI:

> *"It can broaden perspectives. Sometimes you get suggestions for moments or exercises that you had not thought of yourself. It can function as inspiration. But at the same time, I am aware that it requires that you can evaluate it yourself. Otherwise, there is a risk that you accept the structure without really reflecting on whether it suits the organization."- (Dan, Unit Manager in the public sector)*

We interpret this as a shift in how managerial identity is carried out in practice. The role remains tied to responsibility and decision-making, but the basis for that responsibility is less directly connected to the manager's own knowledge and production. Instead, it becomes grounded in the ability to evaluate and work with external input. Placed next to each other, these accounts begin to point in different directions. Managers are clear that they make the decisions and remain responsible for them, while at the same time describe working with outputs that are not always grounded in what they themselves know or could have produced on their own. We do not see one of these sides replacing the other, as both remain present in how they describe their work.

4.3.3 The human side of management

While managers described changes in how managerial work is carried out through GenAI, they also pointed to aspects of their role that they did not see as replaceable. Despite the growing use of GenAI, interpersonal interaction, understanding others and human judgment were emphasized as remaining closely tied to the manager. Emma reflects on this when discussing what might happen over time:

> *"One risk is that you become lazy. You do not need to do any skills. You do not need to get better at communicating. You do not have any incentive to become a better communicator, a better presenter or to compose your text better, because you get everything served to you."- (Emma, Program Lead in the technology sector)*

From this, we see that the concern moves beyond the immediate situation because what she points to is that when certain parts of the work are taken over, there is less need to practice them. While responsibility remains with the manager, how it is carried out is not clear, as communication, presentation and writing become less central to practice in everyday work. At the same time, managers point to aspects of their work that they do not see as replaceable. Adam returns to this when he talks about leadership:

> *"A large part of leadership is interpersonal, and I cannot see that changing. It is about being able to motivate people, to see them, understand what strengths and weaknesses different people have… When I read a CV, it can be fantastic, but then the person can barely speak. I think the requirement to meet people in real life will actually increase."- (Adam, Unit Manager in a laboratory)*

We read this as grounding managerial roles in something that remains closely tied to the manager even if other parts of the work shift, this part is still clearly theirs. Looking across these accounts, we see an important contrast emerge for how managers understand their position. Even as the work becomes more digitalized, they do not describe themselves as less needed. Instead, we interpret that they continue to position themselves through the parts of the work that cannot be replaced, mainly those that involve interaction, judgment and understanding others. In this sense, the human side of managerial work becomes a way of maintaining ownership and identity in relation to GenAI. At the same time, GenAI changes how managerial work is carried out, which creates a constant balancing act. Managers use the tool and sometimes rely on it but still see themselves as the ones who decide and stand for what is done. In our point of view, managers are therefore still responsible, even if they are no longer doing all parts of the work themselves.

4.4 Social Context

In line with Weick (2005), sensemaking is fundamentally social, as interpretations are shaped through interaction, discussion and shared understandings with others. As we move further into the interviews, we begin to look more closely at how managers describe working through questions and where they turn when they need advice. What becomes clear is that colleagues, discussions and shared perspectives still remain important in how managers make sense of situations. At the same time, these no longer appear to be the only ways they work through uncertainty. Through several interviews, managers describe engaging in a similar kind of back-and-forth reasoning without necessarily involving another person. It is not presented as replacing human interaction, but rather as something that has gradually become part of how they already work. This is where we begin to pause, because if similar reflective processes can take place without another person being physically present, then sensemaking itself becomes somewhat less dependent on direct interaction with others.

4.4.1 GenAI as a reflective dialogue

Several managers described using GenAI in ways that resembled an ongoing dialogue, where the technology became part of how they reflected on situations and worked through uncertainty. Fiona is very explicit about this:

> *"I see AI as a colleague that I can go back and forth with… I will open AI and ask my question instead… just checking, can I go this way, does this align with how I am thinking?" – (Fiona, Unit Manager in municipal care)*

What is especially interesting is how she describes the interaction, because she does not talk about GenAI as a tool she simply uses to search for information, but as something she can go back and forth with, which gives the interaction a more conversational and reflective character. The wording matters because it suggests that reflection is no longer carried out only through discussions with colleagues but can also take place privately through interaction with GenAI. A similar shift appears, although more implicitly, in Chris' account, when describing how he works with GenAI, he says:

> *"So its kind of… he, it gets a bullet point list or a list of what should be included, and then it turns it into a flowing document." – (Chris, Unit manager in Healtcare)*

As we can see, "it" shifts to "he" in the middle of the sentence. This is not something he explicitly reflects on himself, but it becomes noticeable in the way he speaks about the interaction. For us, this suggests that the interaction is not only treated as technical but also begins to take on a more human-like character in practice. Adam describes something similar, although what he emphasizes is slightly different.

> *"One thing I think is very good is this tirelessness in generative AI. You can come back three days later and ask "why then?" question in the same thread and it just continues. That does not work with a human being. You cannot just show up three days later and say, "Tell me again why this is the case", or "I have another idea". There is something about this availability that is so high. It is always awake."- (Adam, Unit Manager in a laboratory)*

What stands out here is not only that the interaction continues, but how he compares it to a person. We find it interesting that the difference he highlights is not about quality, but about availability. A colleague cannot be returned to in the same way because the conversation

depends on timing, memory and whether the other person is there. Here, that limitation disappears, as the exchange can be paused and resumed without explanation. We therefore interpret that as his account points to changing conditions for sensemaking, where it becomes easier to keep something to oneself and return to it repeatedly rather than involving someone else in the process.

4.4.2 Human interaction remains necessary

At the same time, the interviews do not point in one direction. Chris brings us back to situations where working things through with others is still necessary.

> *"With generative AI, you get a finished output, a text or a suggested decision, right away. But discussions with colleagues and other managers are still essential in decision-making. The people involved need to talk things through. That's how you bring in different experiences and viewpoints. It's easier to get diverse perspectives that way than from AI, which can be biased."- (Chris, Unit Manager in healthcare)*

What he emphasizes is not speed or convenience, but what others contribute through their experience and perspectives, something that emerges through interaction with different people rather than from a single source. That is where we begin to see a difference in what is at stake, as some questions appear possible to explore alone while others seem to require that different people are involved from the beginning. The issue is therefore not only about getting an answer, but about how that answer is takes shape through interaction with others. Emma adds another layer when she talks about what happens before a discussion even starts:

> *"If I'm running a workshop, I've noticed it can be limiting when I come in with ready-made points, especially if they're generated by GenAI. If I already have a few suggested solutions in mind, people tend to move in that direction. And since I'm leading the meeting, there's already a bit of a power imbalance. So if I present certain ideas early on, the group often ends up there instead of exploring things more freely."- (Emma, Program Lead in the technology sector)*

What becomes important for us is not that she uses GenAI, but how those ideas enter the situation. She describes how the group tends to follow the direction that is already present and although it is not imposed, it still shapes what becomes possible to think. Because she is leading the meeting, those starting points carry weight, making the influence less visible but still quite strong. We therefore begin to see that GenAI does not only affect individual thinking, but can

also shape interaction indirectly by setting the frame before others have had a chance to contribute. She then draws a very clear boundary in other situations:

> *"If you are going to have a conversation with an employee about their development, give them feedback, help them develop, something that has to do with the personal side, then never AI. It cannot capture the whole context. It does not know how late this person has worked, what challenges they have had with difficult stakeholders. It does not know that someone's mother just died, that they have a newborn baby at home, that they have not slept. But I know that."- (Emma, Program Lead in the technology sector)*

The way she explains this is very concrete, as she points to things that are not visible in data, such as personal situations and relationships. What is missing is therefore not only information, but a deeper understanding of the person developed over time. In these situations, the conversation depends on the relationship and cannot be separated from it. Across the interviews, managers still turn to colleagues but not always first. In some situations, they initially work through issues on their own, for example by using AI, before involving others when a fuller understanding is needed. The social part of the managerial work therefore remains important, but it does not always come first in the process.

4.5 Emerging Theme: Hidden Influence in Formulation and the Lack of Clear Structure

An unresolved tension emerges across the interviews. Managers repeatedly describe GenAI as "just" a tool for formulation, while at the same time pointing to a lack of clear guidance for how it should be used. In this space, formulation begins to matter more than it appears. Even when ideas originate from the manager, the way they are phrased is not neutral. We emphasize that different word choices, even subtle ones, can shift meaning and direction. What is framed as "just formulation" therefore becomes a way to downplay the subtle influence GenAI can have over how decisions are interpreted and understood. In the absence of clearer guidance for GenAI use, this influence may become easier to overlook. Chris illustrates this in how he separates decision-making from the tool:

> *"I do not ask for any opinions about it, only for the formulation. The way I use it is more that once the decision has already been made, then it has been made… after that, it is formulations and similar things that I use it for."- (Chris, Unit Manager in healthcare)*

Here, formulation is treated as something that comes after the "real" work. This makes us question what is really being said here, because if the way something is formulated changes how it is understood, then formulation cannot simply be a final step. Instead, it becomes part of how the decision itself takes shape. Different word choices, even when they describe the same underlying idea, can shift emphasis and tone. However, he later also adds:

> *"You have to fight a bit to make it neutral in its own opinions."- (Chris, Unit Manager in healthcare)*

For us, this becomes central because if formulation requires effort to remain neutral, then it is not neutral to begin with, suggesting that wording itself carries influence, even when it is framed as secondary. At the same time, Chris also highlights the lack of structure around this GenAI use:

> *"I do not think we talk about it much. But I think we should talk about it more, because we all use it, it is fast and accessible."- (Chris, Unit Manager in healthcare)*

This reflects a situation where the use of GenAI is widespread and already embedded in everyday work, but not formally grounded. We see that the tool is integrated in practice, yet not clearly structured at the organizational level in a way that creates a shared understanding of when and how it should be used. Adam makes this lack of structure even more explicit:

> *"There is a lack of a well-thought-out strategy… it becomes very much that each individual is experimenting on their own. It is talked about, but it was not really introduced in that way. People have started using it quite organically."- (Adam, Unit Manager in a laboratory)*

What stands out here is that responsibility shifts to the individual because without clear guidance, managers define their own boundaries for what is appropriate use. At the same time, the tool actively reshapes how their work is expressed:

> *"…then I can put my own reasoning into Copilot and it reformulates the language so that it aligns with legal standards. In that way, the document becomes more sustainable if it were to be challenged or appealed." (Adam, Unit Manager in a laboratory)*

For us this means that formulation is not only about clarity, but also tied to whether decisions will appear valid, legitimate or aligned with external requirements. Even when the reasoning

originates from the manager, the wording plays a key role in how it is received. Ben brings in another contrast by resisting this influence:

> *"I got a really good script. But I never used it because I felt that this is not me. The risk is that it shines through and she thinks: that was not really him"- (Ben, Production Manager in manufacturing)*

Here, formulation becomes a question of authorship where the issue is not correctness, but whether it still feels like something the manager can stand behind. When the wording no longer reflects how they would express themselves, it loses value. This highlights that formulation is not neutral but closely tied to ownership and credibility. In contrast, Emma points out what happens when this type of formulation becomes too dominant:

> *"When there is so much AI fluff, you can sometimes lose the essence of what someone is trying to say."- (Emma, Program Lead in the technology sector)*

We interpret this as a different side of what we saw earlier which is pointing to how formulation, when heavily shaped by GenAI, can begin to distort rather than clarify meaning. When the wording becomes too polished, the original meaning can become less clear. Instead of strengthening the message, it can weaken what was meant from the start. In this sense, formulation does not only shape how something is received but can also affect what is being communicated. Fiona's account shows how this plays out in everyday situations:

> *"Sometimes it can help when you are subjective, maybe you have received something and you are affected by it. Then you can take your text and let AI turn it into something professional." - (Fiona, Unit Manager in municipal care)*

Here, formulation becomes a way to adjust tone and remove subjectivity. What is presented as making something professional is also a transformation of how the message is expressed. In this context, formulation becomes a way of reshaping the message to fit expected standards, rather than just clarifying it. What emerges, then, is a subtle tension between wanting to remain in control of the message while also allowing AI-generated formulations to shape how that message is expressed.

4.6 Chapter Summary of main findings

4.6.1 How Managers Interpret GenAI

Across the interviews, a consistent picture emerged of managers using GenAI as a source of advice in their everyday work not as a provider of direct answers, but as something to think with. Rather than following AI-generated suggestions directly, managers turned to the technology to orient themselves in uncertain situations, structure tasks and explore possible directions when time, knowledge or clarity were limited. GenAI became useful because it offered a workable starting point, something to react to and build from, instead of something to simply accept or reject. In this sense, the technology functions less like a decision-making tool and more as a way of entering and working through tasks that might otherwise be difficult to begin.

4.6.2 How Managers Evaluate GenAI

Working with GenAI rarely felt straightforward for the managers in this study. A recurring tension emerged between finding the technology useful and remaining uncertain about whether its outputs could be trusted. Outputs were often experienced as convincing and professionally coherent, yet managers were also aware that they could be inaccurate, biased or disconnected from the specific organizational context they were working in. The value of GenAI therefore depended less on whether the information was objectively correct and more on whether it appeared reasonable and actionable enough to move work forward in a given situation. Managers in our study operated in a middle ground, treating AI-generated advice as sufficiently plausible to act on while remaining open to questioning and correcting them when needed.

4.6.3 How Managers Integrate GenAI

Even as GenAI became more embedded in managerial work as a source of advice, managers still positioned themselves as the ones responsible for final judgment. However, the boundaries around authorship and expertise became less straightforward when managers worked with AI-generated outputs that were not fully grounded in their own knowledge or formulations. Several managers described using GenAI in ways that resembled an ongoing reflective dialogue, returning to the technology to think through situations, test ideas and gain orientation, while still emphasizing that human interaction and personal judgment remained irreplaceable in certain situations. Most subtly, managers described using GenAI for “just formulation”, framing it as a final and relatively neutral step after the real thinking had already taken place. Yet the findings suggest that this framing may blur something important, as AI-generated language did

not simply package existing decisions but quietly shaped how situations, responsibilities and possible actions were understood, often before any real evaluation had begun.

5. Discussion

This chapter discusses the findings of the study in relation to existing research and the theoretical framework presented in the literature review. More specifically, the chapter examines how managers interpret, evaluate and integrate GenAI as a source of advice in everyday managerial work. Through the lens of sensemaking, the discussion explores how GenAI becomes involved in managerial reasoning. Particular attention is given to how AI-generated formulation itself becomes a form of advisory support. We further highlight how the integration of GenAI extends beyond efficiency and informational support, influencing both managerial sensemaking and the psychological conditions under which managerial action becomes possible.

5.1 Perceived control and the subtle shaping of managerial reasoning

To answer the research question of how managers interpret, evaluate and integrate GenAI as a source of advice in their day-to-day work, we identified an important tension in how managers positioned themselves in relation to AI-generated support. Managers described themselves as independent and critically reflective decision makers, even while GenAI had become involved in how they interpreted and navigated managerial situations. Through the interviews, participants emphasized that final responsibility remained human and that AI-generated outputs should never be accepted uncritically. Statements such as "*I decide in the end*" and "*I never trust it blindly*" appeared especially when managers discussed competence, expertise and professional responsibility. At the same time, managers described turning to GenAI when situations felt unclear or difficult to handle. The technology was used to organize thoughts, explore alternatives and create a way forward in situations where managers otherwise felt stuck. In relation to how managers integrated GenAI into their work, it seemed that they tried to defend human authority while also allowing GenAI to become part of the reasoning processes behind their decisions.

Seen through the lens of *identity work*, which Sveningsson & Alvesson (2003) refers to the ongoing process of forming, maintaining and revising a sense of self, this tension can be understood as an attempt to preserve professional identity in a context where established understandings of managerial expertise are being challenged. Managers often highlighted

autonomy, critical thinking and personal responsibility when discussing situations where GenAI had become useful. Rather than resisting the technology, they seemed to incorporate it in ways that protected their understanding of themselves as competent and legitimate professionals. The repeated emphasis on human judgment therefore said something more than just how managers used GenAI, because it also helped them maintain a sense of themselves as competent and responsible professionals in a situation where parts of their reasoning had come to depend on AI-generated input.

Goffman's (1959) discussion of *impression management* further helps explain how this professional self-image was presented in the interviews. Goffman argues that individuals present themselves in ways that shape how others understand them and the situation. The findings related to how managers evaluate GenAI, showed a strong emphasis that they do not trust it blindly which in turn appeared to serve a purpose beyond simply describing behavior. In our view, it was also a way of presenting themselves as responsible users in relation to a technology that could otherwise make the boundaries of expertise less clear.

A related dynamic to this behavior becomes visible through *identity regulation*, which refers to how norms, values and expectations shape how individuals understand themselves in organizational roles (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). Throughout the interviews, GenAI was described as a supporting tool rather than as something that actively shaped decision making, which made it easier to use AI generated output without threatening the image of the manager as responsible. This does not mean that managers denied GenAI's influence, instead they may have understood the technology through a familiar idea of management where a manager can seek support from others but still remains responsible for the final outcome.

We could identify that GenAI became a part of how managers interpreted situations and developed their thinking from an early start, which resonates with Orlikowski's (2007) argument that technology and social practice are inherently entangled and cannot be meaningfully separated. Although managers tried to show that final decisions remained theirs, GenAI can still be seen as influencing how situations were approached. This entanglement between technology and social practice also connects to advice-taking research, which shows that individuals evaluate advice in relation to factors such as credibility and usefulness with existing knowledge **(**Harvey et al., 2000; Bonaccio & Dalal, 2006). Managers explained that they compared AI-generated suggestions with their own experience, before deciding whether the outputs were useful.

Traditional judge-advisor models assume that decision-makers first form their own judgment before evaluating external advice (Bonaccio & Dalal, 2006; Bailey et al., 2023). However, managers in our study often engaged with GenAI before their own understanding of the situation had fully developed. Instead of first reaching an independent conclusion and then assessing AI-generated input afterward, managers used GenAI while still trying to reduce uncertainty, structure their thinking and determine possible ways forward. As a result, managerial reasoning and AI-generated input did not always appear as two separate stages in the decision-making process but instead developed through ongoing interaction with the system. This complicates the linear assumptions embedded within traditional advice-taking literature as Bonaccio & Dalal (2006, p.129) largely frame advice as input that is evaluated after an initial understanding of a situation has already been formed, where "*the judge weighs his or her own initial decision and the advisor's recommendation and arrives at a final decision*".

Kämmer et al. (2023, p.111) however describe organizational decision-making as an evolving process shaped by uncertainty, where the "*advice may come from single advisors or from larger advice networks and the decision process may involve numerous steps and take several months*". Our study aligns more with this perspective, while further contributing to it by showing how GenAI may become involved even before managers have fully defined the situation itself. In this sense, rather than reasoning independently before evaluating external advice, managers' understanding of situations often appeared to develop alongside AI-generated input through ongoing interaction with the system.

Furthermore, Leonardi's (2011) concept of *imbrication*, which describes how human and material agencies become interlinked through work practices, helps explain this integration. Our findings on how managers used GenAI from the earliest stages of interpreting a situation support his perspective, showing how managerial reasoning and AI-generated input became closely connected before problems had even been fully defined. However, this connection was not only visible in routines, but it also appeared in the interpretive processes through which managers made sense of uncertainty. When managers used GenAI as a brainstorming partner or a way of sorting through complex information, the technology did not simply assist once a problem had already been clearly defined, but it became part of how managers approached uncertainty early on. Moreover, Hermann's (2025) discussion of the *illusion of control* further sharpens this interpretation where he argues that GenAI users may experience themselves as guiding and refining outputs while the system also shapes the result, which can affect perceived control. This is relevant to our study because managers often experienced themselves as fully

in control while their reasoning was still subtly shaped through interaction with AI generated outputs. GenAI can therefore be understood as becoming embedded in managerial sensemaking itself, being involved not only in the evaluation of decisions, but also in the earlier interpretive processes through which situations first became understandable and actionable for managers.

5.2 Beyond Efficiency: Hidden Influence and Psychological Support

While Kämmer et al. (2023) describe advice-seeking as a way to reduce uncertainty and support decision-making, our study indicates that managers also used GenAI to manage psychological pressure. Through the interviews, managers described turning to the system for something to work from, mainly in situations where they lacked sufficient knowledge, time or a clear starting point. This becomes important because it suggests that the role of GenAI in managerial work may extend beyond informational support and into the psychological conditions where managerial action becomes possible. Earlier research has described managerial work as fragmented, interruption-driven and shaped by ongoing ambiguity, where managers are expected to act despite incomplete information and continuous pressure (Mintzberg, 1975; Kotter, 1982; Wallo & Coetzer, 2023).

Under such conditions, waiting for certainty is rarely possible, managers must therefore produce plausible responses to keep work moving forward. This aligns with Weick et al.'s (2005) argument that sensemaking is guided more by plausibility than accuracy. At the same time, the findings related to how managers evaluated GenAI indicate that this plausibility carried psychological weight, as several managers described how GenAI helped organize their thinking. Kramer (1999) argues that uncertainty motivates individuals to seek information, using strategies ranging from asking directly to observing indirectly, depending on factors such as time pressure and how they wish to be perceived. In this context, turning to GenAI can be understood as one such information-seeking strategy, driven by the need to move forward despite uncertainty.

More specifically, in our study this information-seeking behavior often emerged through formulation itself, as managers described how AI-generated wording guided how difficult or sensitive situations could be communicated. The formulation therefore appeared to function as a form of advice regarding how managers should frame and present organizational situations to others. Traditionally, as we mentioned earlier, formulation has been understood as the process through which individuals organize thoughts and turn them into structured language (Coirier et al., 2002). Moreover, this also connects to Abreu et al.'s (2026) argument that language does

not merely describe situations but actively shapes how they are interpreted and understood. Applied to AI-generated formulation, this could mean that what appears professionally neutral is already doing interpretive work, as structure and language may determine what becomes relevant before any conscious evaluation takes place.

What managers perceive as just formulation can therefore carry more weight than it appears, as AI-generated formulations subtly highlight certain interpretations and direct attention toward specific alternatives before reasoning has even fully begun, functioning in this sense as extracted cues that shape the direction of managerial thinking from the beginning (Weick et al., 2005). This also resonates with Fairhurst & Putnam's (2004) understanding of organizations as discursive constructions, where what people notice and treat as meaningful is shaped through language. As part of how managers integrate GenAI into everyday work, formulation appeared to serve a broader purpose than linguistic assistance alone, becoming a way for managers to reduce communicative uncertainty and feel more confident that their responses would be perceived as more reasonable.

Bromage's (1970) discussion of *defensive writing* becomes important here, as she observed that managerial communication is shaped not only by what needs to be said but by the writer's awareness of how they will be judged by those who read it. In several of our interviews, managers described spending a lot of effort anticipating how specific formulations might be interpreted by others, mainly in situations involving disagreement, criticism or organizational sensitivity. In some interviews, this also involved using GenAI to reformulate language so that documents aligned more closely with for example legal or organizational standards, making them appear more sustainable if later challenged or appealed. GenAI therefore appeared to become directly involved in this process of reformulation by offering wording that was perceived as more neutral and professionally acceptable than their own immediate formulations. In this sense, managers' *defensive writing* became shaped through AI-generated language rather than remaining only an individual communicative strategy.

Repeated use of GenAI in these situations may also begin to influence how the system itself is perceived. Several managers appeared to return to GenAI not only to improve communication, but to gain reassurance before presenting difficult messages to others. The system became something they could test formulations against, refine wording through or bounce ideas off when uncertainty emerged around how a message would be received. This resonates with Garcés-Manzanera & McBride's (2025) description of GenAI as a "*cognitive mediator*", where interaction with the system becomes part of the formulation process and supports users in

working through ideas during writing. Thus, the way managers described interacting with GenAI suggests that the system was not only used as a functional support tool. Although managers generally remained aware that they were interacting with a technological system rather than another person, some descriptions reflected subtle forms of what Saracini et al. (2025, p. 2) describe as "*anthropomorphic bias"*, where users begin attributing human-like understanding and emotional capability to AI systems. Turkle (2011, p.154) further explains that human-like responsiveness and interaction may create what she describes as a sense or even a fantasy of "*near communion*" with technological systems, where users begin experiencing interaction with technology in relational rather than purely functional terms. Through conversational exchange and perceived responsiveness, individuals may gradually experience the system as socially present, creating a feeling that "*something is going on between them*" (Turkle, 2011, p. 119 & 154). In the context of GenAI, this may encourage subtle forms of psychological attachment, especially in situations involving uncertainty or the need for reassurance. One manager (Chris) even referred to ChatGPT as "he" while another (Fiona) described the system as a "colleague", neither reflecting on these characterizations in the moment. These subtle ways of describing GenAI suggest that the system was sometimes experienced as more than a purely technological tool, especially in situations where managers looked for reassurance. In such situations, the boundary between a technical tool and advisor appeared to blur.

Existing research on cognitive overreliance captures part of this overlapping picture but leaves something important unaddressed. Buçinca et al. (2021) demonstrate that coherent and structured AI-generated outputs can increase trust while reducing deeper analytical engagement meanwhile Keding & Meissner (2021) show that managers often perceive AI-generated recommendations as more rational and trustworthy than human advice. While these studies emphasize overreliance rooted in perceptions of accuracy and rationality, our present findings point toward a somewhat different reliance. To explain this, managers did not appear to rely on GenAI primarily because they trusted it to be correct, but because professionally formulated outputs reduced pressure and made difficult situations feel more manageable. This suggests that overreliance may emerge not only through perceptions of accuracy, but also through the emotional relief associated with polished and socially convincing language.

These findings regarding managerial integration of GenAI further develop the earlier review of the system as a form of advisory support, where work shifts from producing own formulations toward evaluating and refining AI-generated outputs (Memmert et al., 2025). As AI-generated

language becomes more integrated into managerial work, we begin to reconsider what managerial formulation actually means when professionally accepted wording no longer fully originates from the manager alone. Over time, managers may therefore begin relying less on their own immediate formulations and instead seek advice from AI-generated wording that feels professionally safer and more legitimate.

6. Conclusion

In this section, we present the key conclusions regarding how managers interpret, evaluate and integrate GenAI as a source of advice in their day-to-day work. We then outline the study's theoretical and practical contributions, followed by a critical reflection on the study's limitations and suggestions for future research.

This study explored how managers interpret, evaluate and integrate GenAI as a source of advice in their day-to-day work. What the data showed was not a picture of managers passively following AI-generated recommendations, but of managers working with, questioning and negotiating AI-generated suggestions in situations where clarity, time and certainty were limited. GenAI became embedded in managerial work as something that helped managers move forward when they did not fully know how to proceed.

Across the four sensemaking properties examined in this study, a consistent pattern emerged. When it came to extracted cues, managers used GenAI to orient themselves in uncertain situations, treating AI-generated outputs as starting points and possible directions rather than final answers. In relation to plausibility, the technology was valued not because it was always correct, but because it produced outputs that appeared coherent and actionable enough to work with, even when managers remained aware that those outputs could be unreliable. Regarding identity construction, managers positioned themselves as responsible for final judgment, drawing clear boundaries between what GenAI could contribute and what remained theirs to decide. Yet those boundaries became less straightforward when AI-generated formulations shaped outputs that managers were expected to stand behind. Finally, in terms of social context, managers described using GenAI in ways that resembled a reflective dialogue, returning to it when uncertainty emerged, while still maintaining that human interaction and personal judgment remained necessary in situations involving people, conflict or organizational sensitivity.

Beyond these four properties, an emerging theme ran across the interviews that proved difficult to ignore. Managers frequently described using GenAI for just formulation, framing it as a neutral final step after the real thinking had already taken place. Yet the findings suggest this framing may obscure something important. AI-generated language did not simply package existing decisions but quietly shaped how situations, responsibilities and possible actions were understood, often before any conscious evaluation had begun. Formulation itself became part of the advisory process, making its influence smaller in appearance but not in its impact. Despite this, managers continued to position themselves as responsible for final judgment where human interpretation and contextual understanding, especially in situations involving employees, conflict or organizational responsibility. GenAI therefore did not seem to replace managerial judgment but became embedded within the interpretive work surrounding judgment itself.

Perhaps the most interesting realization emerging from this study is how quietly this integration seemed to happen. Managers rarely described GenAI as replacing thinking because instead it became something they repeatedly returned to when uncertainty emerged, almost like an extra conversational layer within managerial work. What feels somewhat ironic is that while studying managers' use of GenAI, we realized that we had started engaging with it in similar ways ourselves. Looking back, that realization says something important about GenAI itself where the transition from technological tool to advisor rarely feels dramatic while it is happening. It slips into everyday work gradually, almost unnoticed, until it starts shaping not only what we do, but how we think through problems in the first place. We only became fully aware of this because we experienced it ourselves, noticing how naturally GenAI had begun to fold into our own reasoning and writing process. In the end, we may have had more in common with the managers in our study than we initially expected.

6.1 Theoretical contribution

This study contributes to the fields of management and organizational studies in three interconnected ways. First, the study extends Weick's sensemaking theory by showing that sensemaking does not only unfold through interaction between people. Previous research has primarily described sensemaking as a social process, shaped through communication, shared interpretation and interaction with others. The findings of this study suggest that GenAI can become part of this process, particularly through the properties of extracted cues and plausibility. Managers described using AI-generated outputs as starting points for orientation, as structures to work from and as inputs that shaped what appeared reasonable enough to act on. This challenges the assumption that sensemaking is exclusively interpersonal and points

toward a broader understanding of how meaning is constructed in organizational work when non-human actors participate in the process.

Second, and perhaps most originally, this study contributes to advice-taking literature by showing that AI-generated formulation itself functions as a form of advice. Traditional advice-taking research understands advice as explicit recommendations that decision-makers evaluate and either accept or reject. This study suggests that GenAI's influence rarely works this way because it operates through the wording and structuring of situations before decisions are even made. Drawing on formulation theory, the study argues that AI-generated language is not a neutral final step but actively shapes how situations, responsibilities and decisions are interpreted and understood. This opens a connection between advice-taking literature and formulation theory that we believe deserves more attention in relation to GenAI.

Third, the study contributes to understanding identity work in AI-mediated managerial contexts. Building on Sveningsson & Alvesson's work on managerial identity, the findings show that managers actively tried to maintain professional legitimacy and a sense of ownership over decisions even as GenAI became increasingly integrated into how their work was carried out. At the same time, the boundary between what originated from the manager and what came from AI-generated outputs became less straightforward, especially when managers worked with professionally formulated material that was not fully grounded in their own knowledge or wording. This extends existing theory on identity work into a new technological context where the relationship between expertise, authorship and responsibility is difficult to define clearly.

6.2 Practical contribution

The findings of this study carry practical implications for managers and organizations navigating the growing integration of GenAI in everyday work. A central observation across the interviews was that managers consistently described their use of GenAI as being limited to formulation, as if this framing placed it outside the boundaries of real decision-making. However, as the findings suggest, this was less a deliberate strategy and more a genuine blind spot. Managers did not appear to actively reflect on the fact that formulation is already interpretation, meaning that the way a situation is worded shapes how it is understood, by the manager themselves and by others. The practical implication of this is that reducing GenAI use to just formulation does not make its influence smaller, it makes it less visible. This has consequences for how organizations approach GenAI. The managers in this study largely experimented with the technology individually, without shared norms or collective

conversations about when and how it should be used in managerial work. As long as this remains the case, the influence of AI-generated formulation on interpretation, responsibility and decision-making is unlikely to be questioned or even noticed. Organizations therefore need to create space for reflective conversations about GenAI that go beyond technical guidelines and address the more subtle ways the technology shapes managerial thinking in practice.

For managers individually, the findings suggest a need to move beyond source criticism of AI-generated content toward a broader awareness of formulation as an interpretive act. Rather than only asking whether the information provided by GenAI is accurate, managers may benefit from also asking whether the wording itself is directing attention in particular ways, framing responsibilities differently or shaping how a situation will be understood by others. Finally, the findings point toward a need to reconsider how leadership development addresses GenAI. As managers rely more on AI-generated language for communication and written work, the practical skills involved in formulating and expressing ideas independently risk being practiced less over time. In other words, the concern is that if managers outsource formulation and communication to GenAI, they may lose confidence and ability in doing it themselves, which matters because those skills are central to what makes a good manager, especially in sensitive situations involving people, conflict or organizational responsibility.

6.3 Critical review and suggestions for future research

Looking back at the study, one limitation is that by relying solely on interviews, we could only access what managers were willing and able to articulate about their use of GenAI. However, as we have argued throughout this study, much of GenAI's influence operates beneath the surface, such as in the way situations get framed, in the wording that feels natural to use and in what appears reasonable before a decision is even made. These are the kinds of processes that are difficult to put into words in an interview setting and that managers themselves may not fully notice. Observing managers actually working with GenAI in real situations, rather than reflecting on it afterwards, would have given us a much closer look at how that influence unfolds in practice. This is something we would have wanted to do differently and it remains one of the most valuable directions for future research to pursue.

The sample also shaped what became visible in the findings because the managers who participated in this study were those who felt comfortable enough to discuss their use of GenAI in a professional context. Those who were more skeptical, more restricted by organizational policies or simply more uncertain about whether they should be using it at all, were less likely

to take part. This means that the findings probably reflect a version of managerial GenAI use that is more open and reflective than what exists across organizations more broadly. A wider and more varied sample, including managers who used GenAI but remained more skeptical or cautious about it, would have added perspectives that this study could not fully reach. There is also something worth acknowledging about the timing of the study, mainly because we conducted it during a period where GenAI is still relatively new in organizational settings, where managers are still figuring out how to use it and where to draw the line. The practices and reflections we captured are therefore shaped by this period of time and they will likely look quite different in a few years as the technology develops and organizational norms around it settle. In that sense, the findings should be read and interpreted accordingly since the use of GenAI across different departments still is in early stage of adoption.

For future research, the most immediate need is for studies that get closer to actual practice such as workplace observations that follow managers as they interact with GenAI in real time would allow researchers to study the kind of subtle, moment-to-moment influence that interviews can only gesture toward. This seems especially important given what this study found about formulation, since the shaping of language and interpretation happens quickly, often without reflection and in ways that are much easier to observe than to recall. Similar to the observational approach, research that follows the same managers over a longer period would also add something that a study like ours simply cannot offer.

We captured how managers relate to GenAI at one point in time, but the more challenging question may be what happens over time. This opened up the following questions that the scope of this study could not answer but that we think are worth taking in consideration: *Does reliance on AI-generated formulation gradually change how managers communicate on their own?* and *Does the boundary between one's own reasoning and AI-assisted reasoning become harder to locate the longer the technology is used?* These are questions that require following the same managers across months or years, tracking not just what they think about GenAI but how their actual work and thinking changes as the technology becomes more embedded. Finally, the managers we spoke with seemed to be unaware of how much GenAI was already shaping both their thinking and the way situations were being formulated. If this is happening at an early stage of adoption, it is worth asking what happens as GenAI becomes more capable and more integrated into everyday managerial work. At some point the question may no longer be how managers make sense of GenAI, but how GenAI quietly becomes part of the way managers make sense of everything else.

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Appendix A: Interview guide (Swedish)

Formaliteter

Välkomnande:

Tack för att du deltar, ditt bidrag är mycket värdefullt.

Syfte:

Denna intervju är en del av en studie som undersöker hur chefer tolkar, värderar och integrerar generativ AI (GenAI) som en form av rådgivning i sitt dagliga arbete.

Genomförande:

- Intervjun beräknas ta cirka 30–50 minuter.
- Samtalet spelas in enbart för analys- och transkriptionsändamål.
- Endast forskargruppen kommer att ha tillgång till inspelningar och insamlat material.
- All information behandlas konfidentiellt och deltagarna anonymiseras genom hela studien.
- Inspelningarna används endast för denna studie och kommer att raderas efter avslutad studie.
- All databehandling sker i enlighet med GDPR och Lunds universitets riktlinjer.
- Deltagandet är frivilligt och du kan när som helst avbryta intervjun utan att behöva ange någon anledning.

Samtycke:

- Innan intervjun börjar informeras du om studiens syfte och hur materialet kommer att hanteras.
- Muntligt samtycke inhämtas innan inspelningen startar.

Dina svar:

- Det finns inga “rätta” eller “fel” svar, vi är intresserade av dina egna erfarenheter och reflektioner.
- Utveckla gärna dina resonemang och exempel så mycket du vill.

Frågor & oklarheter:

- Ställ gärna frågor när som helst om något känns oklart.
- Känner du dig bekväm med att fortsätta och bli inspelad?
- Finns det något du vill få förtydligat innan vi börjar?

Inledande frågor

- Kan du kort beskriva din roll och dina huvudsakliga arbetsuppgifter?
- Hur länge har du arbetat som chef?
- Hur skulle du beskriva din erfarenhet av generativ AI i arbetsrelaterade sammanhang?
- Vilka typer av AI-verktyg använder du idag i ditt arbete?

Extracted cues

- Kan du berätta om situationer där du använder generativ AI i ditt arbete?
- Vad brukar få dig att vända dig till AI i en arbetssituation?
- Hur använder du AI när du stöter på något nytt, osäkert eller svårt att hantera?
- Hur skulle du beskriva det stöd eller den vägledning som AI kan ge i sådana situationer?
- Finns det vissa typer av frågor eller situationer där du oftare använder AI än andra gånger?

Plausibility

- Hur brukar du tänka kring det som GenAI genererar?
- Vad gör att ett AI-genererat svar känns användbart eller rimligt för dig?
- Har du någon gång känt dig osäker kring något AI-genererat? Kan du berätta om det?
- Hur avgör du vad du tar vidare och vad du väljer bort från AI:s output?
- Hur förhåller du dig till AI:s svar i relation till din egen erfarenhet eller kunskap?
- Finns det situationer där du känner större eller mindre tillit till AI?

Identity construction

- Hur tänker du kring AI i relation till din roll som chef?
- Hur ser du på ansvar i situationer där AI varit involverat?
- Påverkar AI på något sätt hur du fattar beslut eller hanterar olika situationer?
- Hur tänker du kring relationen mellan AI och mänskligt omdöme?
- Upplever du att AI påverkar hur du uttrycker dig eller presenterar dig professionellt?
- Finns det delar av ledarskap eller chefskap som du upplever som svåra att koppla till AI?

Social context

- Hur ser samtal kring AI ut inom din organisation?
- Hur skiljer sig AI från att diskutera frågor med kollegor eller andra människor?
- Påverkar AI på något sätt samarbeten, möten eller diskussioner?
- Hur upplever du att andra runt omkring dig ser på användningen av AI i arbetet?
- Finns det situationer där du hellre vänder dig till människor än till AI? Hur tänker du kring det?

Avslutande frågor

- Hur tror du att generativ AI kan påverka chefsrollen framöver?
- Är det något kring dina erfarenheter av AI som en form av rådgivning i arbetet som vi inte har pratat om men som du tycker är viktigt att lyfta?

Appendix B: Interview guide (English)

Formalities

Welcome:

Thank you for participating, your contribution is highly valuable.

*Purpose***:**

This interview is part of a study examining how managers interpret, evaluate and integrate Generative AI (GenAI) as a form of advice in their day-to-day work.

*Procedure**:***

- The interview is expected to last approximately 30–50 minutes.
- The conversation will be recorded solely for analysis and transcription purposes.
- Only the research team will have access to the recordings and collected material.
- All information will be treated confidentially and participants will be anonymized throughout the study.
- The recordings will only be used for this study and will be deleted after the completion of the study.
- All data handling will be conducted in accordance with GDPR and Lund University's guidelines.
- Participation is voluntary and you may withdraw from the interview at any time without having to provide a reason.

Consent:

- Before the interview begins, you will be informed about the purpose of the study and how the material will be handled.
- Verbal consent will be obtained before the recording starts.

Your responses:

- There are no "right" or "wrong" answers; we are interested in your own experiences and reflections.
- Please feel free to elaborate on your reasoning and examples as much as you wish.

Questions & clarifications:

- Please feel free to ask questions at any time if something feels unclear.
- Do you feel comfortable proceeding and being recorded?
- Is there anything you would like clarified before we begin?

Introductory Questions

- Can you briefly describe your role and main responsibilities?
- How long have you worked as a manager?
- How would you describe your experience with Generative AI in work-related contexts?
- What types of AI tools do you currently use in your work?

Extracted Cues

- Can you describe situations where you use Generative AI in your work?
- What usually makes you turn to AI in a work-related situation?
- How do you use AI when you encounter something new, uncertain or difficult to handle?
- How would you describe the support or guidance that AI can provide in such situations?
- Are there certain types of questions or situations where you use AI more often than others?

Plausibility

- How do you usually think about what AI generates?
- What makes an AI-generated response feel useful or reasonable to you?
- Have you ever felt uncertain about something AI generated? Can you tell me about that?
- How do you decide what to take forward and what to disregard from AI's output?
- How do you relate AI's responses to your own experience or knowledge?
- Are there situations where you feel greater or lesser trust in AI?

Identity Construction

- How do you think about AI in relation to your role as a manager?
- How do you view responsibility in situations where AI has been involved?
- Does AI in any way affect how you make decisions or handle different situations?
- How do you think about the relationship between AI and human judgment?
- Do you experience that AI affects how you express yourself or present yourself professionally?
- Are there aspects of leadership or management that you find difficult to connect to AI?

Social Context

- What do conversations about AI look like within your organization?
- How does AI differ from discussing questions with colleagues or other people?
- Does AI in any way affect collaboration, meetings or discussions?
- How do you experience that people around you view the use of AI in work-related settings?
- Are there situations where you would rather turn to people than to AI? How do you think about that?

Closing Questions

- How do you think Generative AI may influence the managerial role in the future?
- Is there anything regarding your experiences of AI as a form of advice in work-related settings that we have not talked about but that you think is important to mention?

Appendix C: Thematic coding

Theme (Sensemaking Property)	Code	Description	Participants
Extracted cues	Orientation and possible directions	GenAI is used to gain direction, formulations, structure and possible ways forward in uncertain situations.	(Adam, Ben, Gabriel, Emma)
Plausibility over accuracy	Useful but uncertain	Describing GenAI as helpful, while recognizing that its output can be misleading or unreliable.	(Adam, Chris)
	Contextual judgment	Evaluating GenAI output through experience, context, colleagues and partial trust.	(Emma, Fiona)
Identity construction	Maintaining responsibility	Responsibility and decision-making must remain with the manager.	(Chris, Emma)
	Ownership becomes less straightforward	Tensions between AI-generated output, professional identity and personal ownership.	(Adam, Gabriel, Dan)
	The human side of management	Human judgment, interpersonal understanding and communication are described as irreplaceable parts of leadership.	(Adam, Emma)
Social context	GenAI as reflective dialogue	GenAI is used as an ongoing conversational partner to reflect on ideas, test reasoning and work through uncertainty individually.	(Fiona, Chris, Adam)
	Human interaction remains necessary	Colleagues and interpersonal discussions remain essential in decision-making and people-related situations.	(Chris, Emma)
Emerging theme	Hidden influence in formulation and lack of clear structure	AI-generated formulation subtly shapes meaning and communication, while organizational guidance around GenAI use remains unclear.	(Chris, Adam, Ben, Emma, Fiona)

Appendix D: Prompts used for Generative AI

- "We wanted to include a short storytelling section in the introduction of our thesis based on one of our interviews. Could you provide feedback on whether the following idea creates an engaging introduction while still fitting an academic context? _____".
- "Is the following sentence grammatically correct? _____"
- "Could you help clarify this sentence? _____"
- "Does this section clearly answer the research question? _____"
- "How could we improve the following paragraph _____ while still keeping our own writing style and argumentation?"
- "Could you help make the following sentence more academically fluent without changing the meaning? _____"
- "How could we make the following discussion more concise without removing important content? _____"
- "Could you suggest suitable linking words for the following paragraph to improve flow and coherence? _____"
- "How could the following section be connected more naturally to the previous discussion? _____"
- "We feel that the following section has become somewhat messy. Could you provide suggestions for improving the structure and flow? _____"
- "Do I need to explain the following section more clearly for the reader to fully understand it? _____"
- "We interpreted the following statement/text in this way _____. Does our interpretation seem reasonable based on the original wording? _____"
- "Could you help identify if there are paragraphs that feel repetitive? *Inserted document*"
- "Looking through the thesis, could you help identify sections where the structure becomes unclear or difficult to follow? *Inserted document*"