SCHOOL OF
ECONOMICS AND
MANAGEMENT

LUND
UNIVERSITY

Department of Business Administration

BUSN79

Degree Project in Accounting and Finance

Spring 2026

Between Compliance and Change: Accountants' Role in Swedish SMEs

Authors:

Nour Allah Barazi

Lovisa Kullberg

Supervisor:

Liesel Klemcke

Abstract

Seminar date: 3rd of June 2026

Course: BUSN79, Degree Project in Accounting and Finance, 15 ECTS

Authors: Nour Allah Barazi and Lovisa Kullberg

Advisor/Examiner: Liesel Klemcke/Niklas Sandell

Five key words: Accountants, Role Theory, Institutional Theory, Hybrid Accountant, SMEs

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to investigate how accountants in Swedish SMEs perceive their professional role and navigate multiple expectations related to regulatory compliance, business support, and organisational demands.

Methodology: The study used a qualitative research approach with a multiple case study of ten Swedish SMEs. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data that was analysed through a thematic analysis. An abductive research approach was used to iteratively connect empirical findings with role theory and institutional theory.

Theoretical perspectives: Role theory and institutional theory are used in combination. Role theory explains how accountants create and perceive their role. It is used to see how individuals interpret, enact, and negotiate expectations, role flexibility, and potential role conflict. Institutional theory creates the base for the analysis of what shapes the accountants role, with a focus on regulative, normative, and cognitive pressures.

Empirical foundation: The findings show that accountants perform a wide range of tasks, combining traditional accounting responsibilities with advisory and operational duties. Regulatory compliance emerges as the foundational logic structuring their work, while organisational proximity and communication reduce perceived role ambiguity.

Conclusions: The study concludes that accountants in Swedish SMEs do not primarily experience role conflict or ambiguity, despite broad and hybrid responsibilities. Instead, they demonstrate high role flexibility, shaped by resource constraints, organisational closeness, and strong compliance demands. Regulatory requirements form the backbone of the role, while communication and prioritisation serve as key mechanisms for managing multiple expectations. The findings nuance existing literature by showing that hybrid roles in SMEs do not necessarily lead to tension but can be experienced as natural and manageable aspects of daily work.

Table of Content

1. Introduction 3

1.1 Purpose and Research question 4

2. Literature Review 4

3. Theory 7

3.1 Institutional Theory 7

3.2 Role Theory 9

4. Method 10

4.1 Research Approach 10

4.2 Interview Design 11

4.3 Choice of Interview Group 12

4.4 Data Collection 13

4.5 Analysis of Data 14

4.6 GDPR and Ethical Principles 15

5. Empirical Results and Analysis 15

5.1 Bean Counter vs. Business Support 15

5.2 Regulatory Compliance as the Foundation of the Role 19

5.3 Low Role Ambiguity but High Role Flexibility 23

5.4 Structuring Work through Communication and Prioritisation 27

6. Discussion 30

7. Conclusions 34

8. Future Research 35

9. Reference List 37

10. Appendix 40

Appendix A - Interview Questions 40

Appendix B - Use of AI-tools 41

1. Introduction

The role of the accountant has in recent decades undergone a global transformation. Traditionally, an accountant has been associated with bookkeeping and routine work, which has been called a bean counter (Pierce & O'Dea, 2003). Later the role of the business partner emerged with broader responsibilities and more strategic decision-making. Accountants have multiple aspects to consider when making decisions, since they need to consider compliance to regulation, operational needs as well as the risk that comes with decisions. At the same time, different managers may have varying expectations and rely on different decision-making approaches. This can complicate the situation for accountants as their role and responsibilities change, as there are more expectations to consider, that in turn influences the way accountants work. In Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) where the employees are fewer and the accounting department often is not that big, could potentially result in one employee being responsible for considering all perspectives of a decision.

In Sweden 99,9% of companies 2024 were classified as SMEs, which takes up a large portion of the economy (Ekonomifakta, 2025). The majority of the companies also have fewer than 10 employees, which can mean that employees often are multifunctional without specialised roles. Accountants can in that way have multiple purposes and thereby be exposed to potential conflicting expectations.

Through role theory the expectations that are placed on accountants can be understood as a number of roles or identities that they are expected to fulfill. These roles may not always align with each other, which leaves room for potential tensions and role conflicts. From another perspective, institutional theory can highlight the broader pressures that are shaping these expectations, such as norms, rules and logics. Together, these perspectives provide a framework for identifying key roles and analysing whether, and how, conflicts arise between them.

Despite existing research on the evolving role of accountants, there is still a need for more research on the individual perspective of these role expectations, and as most of the studies are done on larger companies, the perspective from SMEs is needed to complement the existing research (Wolf et al., 2020; Lambert & Sponem, 2012).

1.1 Purpose and Research question

The purpose of this research study is to investigate how accountants experience their role when met with the need to consider multiple aspects and perspectives when conducting their work. The following research question is used:

How do Swedish accountants in SMEs perceive their role and navigate multiple expectations related to business support, regulatory compliance, and organisational demands?

2. Literature Review

SMEs face multiple challenges and constraints, including acquiring qualified employees, raising capital, complying with regulations, and operating with limited resources (Weigel & Hiebl, 2023; Balzano et al., 2025). Due to these constraints, hiring an accountant can be perceived as costly, which may lead SME owners to limit investments in accounting functions. At the same time, as SME owners do not always fully understand financial reports, accountants take on an important role in translating financial information and providing advice. However, this advisory role can extend beyond traditional accounting responsibilities, potentially creating tensions as accountants may perceive such tasks as outside their professional boundaries, time-consuming, or threatening to their independence (Weigel & Hiebl, 2023).

In this context, the role of the accountant has undergone a transformation from the traditional ‘bean counter’ to a more strategic ‘business partner’, introducing new complexities in the role (Lambert & Sponem, 2012; Goretzki et al., 2013; Pierce & O’Dea, 2003). The bean counter is primarily associated with routine tasks and compliance, which can include tasks such as reporting, bookkeeping and assurance of the fairness of financial data. While the business partner contributes to decision-making and value creation, in the way of being a liaison with managers and providing them with data. In that way the business partner role becomes more of a service role compared to the bean counter role. Although prior research suggests that many accountants perceive their role as service-oriented rather than purely technical (Pierce & O’Dea, 2003), not all organisations demand a business partner role and may instead prioritise traditional accounting functions (Goretzki et al., 2013; Lambert & Sponem, 2012). As a result, the literature identifies the emergence of a hybrid accountant role, combining financial control, business support, strategic advising, and operational involvement (Burns & Baldvinsdottir, 2005; Pierce & O'Dea, 2003).

A widely recognised aspect of this hybrid role is that accountants are expected to respond to multiple and sometimes differing expectations within the organisation. Prior research highlights that expectations related to business support and regulatory compliance may not always align, which can create uncertainty regarding what constitutes appropriate action in specific situations (Byrne & Pierce, 2018; Lambert & Sponem, 2012). These expectations often originate from different organisational actors, such as operational managers, financial management, and external stakeholders, each with their own priorities and informational needs (Byrne & Pierce, 2018). Sivabalachandran and Gooneratne (2023) found that when accountants build their role, they often incorporate non-financial managers' expectations to make the relationship smoother and more aligned with organisational goals.

In particular, non-financial managers may place increasing demands on accountants to provide forward-looking insights and support decision-making, even when such expectations rely on information that is not always readily available (Sivabalachandran & Gooneratne, 2023). Rather than being strictly conflicting, these expectations can be understood as reflecting the broader expansion of the accountant's role, where multiple logics coexist (Burns & Baldvinsdottir, 2005; Wolf et al., 2020). This contributes to the emergence of the hybrid accountant, who must continuously interpret and respond to different organisational demands (Karlsson et al., 2019).

To understand how this hybrid role is shaped, Karlsson et al. (2019) analyse the accountant's role through an institutional perspective, identifying three types of institutional drivers. First, regulative institutional drivers, such as external accounting regulations, internal policies, and formal requirements imposed by top management, define the formal boundaries of the role. Second, normative institutional drivers arise from expectations of top management and operational managers, shaping how accountants are expected to contribute within the organisation. Third, cognitive institutional drivers, including individual preferences, experience, and interpretations, influence how accountants perceive and enact their role. These institutional drivers operate simultaneously and contribute to shaping the hybrid accountant role, as well as potential tensions between different expectations (Karlsson et al., 2019).

Within this framework, the regulative dimension plays a foundational role, as compliance requirements establish the core responsibilities that accountants must fulfil. While there is an increasing demand from management for operational understanding, strategic involvement, and forward-looking analysis, these expectations are layered on top of a compliance-based foundation (Karlsson et al., 2019). In practice, accountants must therefore balance regulatory obligations with broader organisational demands, including business support and advisory roles. This highlights how the accountant's role is shaped not only by formal requirements, but also by organisational expectations and individual interpretations (Wolf et al., 2020; Sivabalachandran & Gooneratne, 2023).

The existing literature highlights several strategies used by accountants to handle ambiguity and the presence of multiple expectations in their work. Burns and Baldvinsdottir (2005) show that hybrid accountants manage these expectations by maintaining close proximity to operations and building trust-based relationships with managers. This facilitates the translation of accounting information into operational terms, while also enhancing mutual understanding through the involvement of managers in routine accounting activities. Research further suggests that accountants adapt their role dynamically, prioritising different logics depending on the situation (Sivabalachandran & Gooneratne, 2023). They found that closer communication and understanding of the operational context, where expectations can be negotiated and adapted to the needs of the organisation can reduce role ambiguity. In practice, this may involve the use of various approaches, such as prioritisation, competence deployment, selective engagement, and communication (Byrne & Pierce, 2018). In other words accountants can either prioritise the operational managers expectations, communicate what is possible for them to do, or not accommodate the expectations at all. In particular, communication is emphasised as a key mechanism for clarifying expectations and reducing ambiguity. Therefore, the literature indicates that accountants actively respond to multiple institutional and organisational expectations through adaptive strategies. However, ambiguity remains regarding how these expectations are prioritised and balanced in practice.

3. Theory

In the following section, the theoretical framework is presented, consisting of the two theories institutional theory and role theory.

3.1 Institutional Theory

Institutional Theory identifies how organisations have been influenced by systems of culturally-constructed rules, norms, and beliefs that establish acceptable organisational forms and practices (Scott, 2014). Unlike traditional views that suggest organisations act rationally as economic units seeking maximum productivity, institutional theory shows that organisational behavior is greatly influenced by the institutional environment within which an organisation operates.

An underlying premise of institutional theory is that organisations will pursue legitimacy by conforming to commonly-held institutional expectations. Meyer and Rowan (1977) contend that many formal organisational structures are developed based upon widely held myths concerning what represents a 'rational' and 'effective' organisation. These organisational structures are formally established due to the desire to demonstrate legitimacy to external stakeholders rather than any demonstrated improvement in efficiency. Therefore, many organisations will separate their formal organisational structure from actual operations and provide formal compliance for legitimate purposes while providing alternative operational objectives.

DiMaggio and Powell (1983) extended this view by developing the concept of institutional isomorphism. The authors explain why organisations in a particular organisational field appear to be becoming increasingly similar over time. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) identified three processes contributing to this phenomenon. First, coercive pressure derived from legal, regulatory constraints, and requirements imposed by external parties. Second, mimetic pressure, driven by uncertainty and a need to emulate successful peers. Third and lastly, normative pressure generated through socialisation resulting from professional training and/or educational institutions. All of these pressure mechanisms lead to increased organisational homogeneity regardless of whether or not the organisations perform well. Overall, institutional theory has provided insight into the complex relationships existing between environmental pressures applied to organisations and the resultant organisational response (including legitimacy, isomorphism and decoupling), thereby enabling a more comprehensive framework for explaining how organisations are both constrained and enabled by their institutional environments.

In addition to the developments described above, additional research was conducted within institutional theory regarding the existence of conflicting institutional logics and pressures within organisational fields. Although earlier formulations assumed organisational stability and homogeneity, subsequent research illustrated that organisational fields are typically composed of pluralistic environments with multiple rule systems operating simultaneously. Scott (2004) observed that institutional environments include areas of agreement and conformity but also areas of contention and change as various actors promote competing sets of norms, values, and belief systems. When organisational fields contain conflicting institutional logics it can lead to internal conflicts within an organisation for example, between professional norms and bureaucratic rules, or between regulatory requirements and market expectations. Consequently, organisations are no longer simply receivers of institutional pressures but must proactively address and reconcile competing demands in order to remain legitimate.

Finally, institutional pressures do not apply equally across all organisational fields, nor are they determined entirely by factors outside the organisational field itself. Instead, the structure of the organisational field, in other words, a community of interacting organisations that share a common meaning system (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), influences levels of institutional pressures and enhances expectations regarding appropriate behaviours. Conversely, this increases the likelihood of differing expectations since each stakeholder group (for example, regulators, professional associations, clients etcetera) may impose conflicting expectations. Accordingly, organisations will strategically choose either to prioritise some expectations over others or provide symbolic compliance with conflicting demands. This demonstrates that organisational conformity to institutional expectations is not always unproblematically achieved, but is frequently achieved through reconciling contradictions between competing sources of legitimacy, which further complicates the relationship between formal organisational form and actual practice.

3.2 Role Theory

The role theory has been studied extensively, especially because it defines behavior of people who occupy some socially defined positions and the behavior is guided by systems of expectation that provide guidelines to behave (Biddle, 1986). The expectations of behavior are based on common norms, values, and beliefs of society and thus define the behaviors that individuals should exhibit at different times and in different contexts. Thus, the expectations help facilitate social interaction and organisation functioning.

Role theory suggests that most people have multiple roles at the same time. Each role has its own unique expectations. Expectations of behavior are learned and internalised through socialisation, which includes observing other people performing the same role and developing common behavioral patterns (Kite et al., 2023). Eventually, people will develop strong associations between the expectations of their roles and their self-identity, affecting not only what they do, but also how they perceive themselves and how others perceive them. Two central ideas in role theory include role conflict and role ambiguity. These two ideas explain why people experience problems due to having many roles. When the expectations from two or more roles conflict with each other, then role conflict exists. Role ambiguity exists when expectations of behavior are ambiguous, unclear or lacking detail (Kahn et al., 1964). Both role conflict and role ambiguity can cause stress and negatively impact performance and well-being. However, newer research indicates that it is possible to have role enhancement. Role enhancement happens when experiencing a positive effect in one role will positively enhance performance and satisfaction in another role (Anglin et al., 2022).

Role taking is another significant concept that describes how individuals learn about the expectations of others. During this learning process, individuals modify their behavior according to the expectations they believe are held by others (Biddle, 1986). In doing so, they support continued social practices. Role enactment represents how individuals perform their roles in real life, based on both their internally developed expectations and situational aspects. Role theory emphasises the interdependent relationships between the individuals and the social structures in which they reside (Scott, 2004). While behavior is determined by external expectations, those expectations are also continually reproduced and reinforced through the continuing performance of roles. Role theory provides a systematic way of examining how individual behavior develops in relation to the larger social and organisational environment, through providing a framework for analysing how expectations are created, communicated, and negotiated (Biddle, 1986; Scott, 2004).

Finally, a further aspect of role theory involves recognising that individuals may receive conflicting expectations related to the same social position. Biddle (1986) points out that roles consist of a variety of expectations derived from various sources (for example, beliefs, norms, preferences), which may lead to alternative views about what constitutes appropriate behavior. The multiplicity of expectations for a given role means that individuals will need to make trade-offs and negotiate competing demands, rather than simply accepting predetermined expectations. Therefore, role performance is an interpretative and active process, wherein individuals will use discretion in order to select which expectations to prioritise and whether to resist expectations in certain circumstances.

In addition, role theory acknowledges that expectations are not always consistent or agreed-upon, illustrating disagreement amongst participants in a social system regarding appropriate role behavior (Biddle, 1986). Actors within a social system may have disparate expectations for an individual's role behavior, creating uncertainty and conflict. A prime example of this is found in large organisations with multiple stakeholders holding varying interests. Individuals will continue to be interpreting and adjusting their behavior due to the competing expectations from all of the stakeholders. Hence, the dynamic and negotiated nature of roles is illustrated, suggesting that role theory does not only describe how expectations guide behavior, but also illustrates how conflicting expectations contribute to tension and strain, necessitate adjustments to behavior and illustrate the continuous formation of social roles (Biddle, 1986).

4. Method

This section explains the study's methodology, including the research approach, interview design, data collection and analysis of the data. Finally, GDPR and ethicality is addressed.

4.1 Research Approach

In this study a qualitative research method is used to find out how accountants in Swedish SMEs construct and interpret their professional roles. A qualitative research approach allows the researcher to understand people's experiences, behaviours, opinions, and perceptions in depth rather than through numerical data (Bryman et al., 2024). Therefore, a qualitative methodology provides a better understanding and allows us to go more into depth of how these role expectations are created and interacted with in practice, because the way professionals think of their role is influenced by their organisational culture, and institutional requirements (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Due to differences in organisations, a multiple case study will be used to collect data from ten accountants working at ten different SMEs with in-house accounting functions. The multiple case study design allows for a comparison of how similar role expectations are acted upon in various ways due to differing contexts. Additionally, an abductive research approach will be utilised where the researchers move back and forth between theory and empirical data to develop the most reasonable explanation for what they observe (Bryman et al., 2024). This allows theoretical knowledge gained from role theory and institutional theory to be combined with empirical findings to create a more comprehensive view of accountants' roles (Timmermans, 2014).

4.2 Interview Design

Semi-structured interviews were used to gather data because they allow for a good mix of structure and openness. The same set of questions was used for all interviews, but the semi-structure allows the interviewer to adjust the order or phrasing during the interview to capture relevant information, avoid unnecessary repetition, and explore answers that were contradictory or unclear (Bryman et al., 2024). Semi-structured interviews are ideal for gathering data when researching complex and ever changing phenomena like professional roles (Easterby-Smith et al., 2012). The semi-structured interview questions were developed based on the theoretical framework for the study and included themes concerning role expectations, compliance responsibilities, participation in decision making and the experienced conflicts between various parts of the role. The interview questions can be found in appendix A.

The semi-structured nature of the interview intended to delve past surface level descriptions by asking participants to consider how their roles had developed over time, how they perceive expectations from other stakeholders and how they deal with competing demands during daily work. The open ended nature of the questions allowed participants to describe their experiences in their own words. Follow up questions were used to increase the detail of the discussion and resolve ambiguity. This format allowed participants to discuss both the formal and informal elements of the accounting role and how these roles are established and modified in daily activities.

4.3 Choice of Interview Group

The study includes ten participants from ten separate Swedish SMEs each with in-house accounting functions. The respondents were selected through selective sampling, as Bryman et al. (2024) explain that this approach ensures that participants meet the specific criteria required for the study. The following definition of SME was used to ensure a homogeneous selection of companies. A SME is a company with less than 250 employees, and a turnover lower or equal to €50 million or a balance sheet with less or equal to €43 million (European Commission, n.d.). The companies were found through a list of companies that are registered or have an office in Malmö or Lund. A criteria was that the interviewees were part of the organisation so that they could describe and have direct access to internal role expectations, organisational dynamics and daily practices. Compared to external accountants or auditors, internal accountants tend to perform both compliance oriented tasks and participate in other organisational processes, thus they represent a more relevant population for studying role conflict.

The inclusion of accountants from different SMEs allows for variability among organisational size, organisational structure, and managerial practices as many SMEs lack formalised roles and are generally flexible. By incorporating this type of variability, comparisons can be made between contexts, and it highlights how similar role expectations may be perceived and performed in a variety of ways.

The chosen companies are from different industries such as information service, security, real estate, energy, retail, electronics, medical, technology, and relocation. Table 1 shows a summary of the interviews with position, industry, date, and duration. Company B was the biggest with 150 employees and eight people in the accounting department. The second biggest accounting department was found at company A with four accountants for a total of 45-50 employees. Company C, D, E, F, G, I and J all had only one employee in the accounting department, although company E had a part time employee at 25%. Company H had a total of two employees in the accounting department. The size of company D, E, F, G, H, I and J varied between 6 and 30 total employees in the company, while company C had around 90-100 employees.

Table 1. Interviews

Person	Position	Industry	Date	Duration
A	Financial Controller	Information service	16/4-2026	36 min
B	Head of accounting	Real estate	21/4-2026	23 min
C	CFO	Security	21/4-2026	38 min
D	Finance Manager	Communication technology	27/4-2026	37 min
E	Finance Director	Energy	27/4-2026	30 min
F	Managerial accountant	Medical	28/4-2026	25 min
G	Management accountant	Retail	29/4-2026	29 min
H	Finance Specialist	Relocation	29/4-2026	28 min
I	CFO	Electronics	5/5-2026	20 min
J	Finance Manager	Technology	15/5-2026	29 min

4.4 Data Collection

Data collection occurred via ten semi-structured interviews with accountants from different SMEs. Before conducting the interviews, each participant received documentation concerning the aim of the study, what will happen to the data collected, and participants' rights as participants, specifically with regard to privacy and anonymity. All participants gave informed consent prior to completing an interview.

The interviews followed the interview guide, but some flexibility was allowed to explore relevant topics further based on the participants' responses. This flexibility provided more detailed and contextual information about how accountants described their roles, the challenges they faced, and the strategies they used to handle conflicting expectations. The length of the interviews also allowed for in-depth discussions, which provided valuable insights. The interview took between 20-40 minutes and was either conducted on site at the company or online through a video interview via Teams. All interviews were conducted in English, except for two that were conducted in Swedish.

Each of the interviews were recorded after receiving permission from the participant, then transcribed word-for-word through the built-in automatic transcription service in the voice recording application. The word-for-word transcription ensures that the whole meaning and all details in their answers are kept (Bryman et al., 2024). The transcriptions were read through after the interview to ensure accuracy and remove errors in the automatic transcription. Transcribing the recordings also provided researchers with additional familiarity with the content which aided in developing codes and analysing the data.

To complement the primary data, secondary data in the form of previous research was also collected. A systematic literature review was conducted through platforms such as Finn, Google Scholar, and Scopus AI, with a focus on articles that were peer-reviewed. A combination of key words and full sentences was used to search for articles. Some of the used key words were accountants, role theory and institutional theory. A range of articles was reviewed to develop an understanding of the research area relevant to the study's research question.

4.5 Analysis of Data

The collected data was analysed using thematic analysis, a qualitative method used to identify and interpret patterns within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). All interview transcripts were anonymised through pseudonymisation prior to analysis to ensure confidentiality (Bernard, 2012). This was executed in the way that each person was assigned a letter between A and J.

The analysis followed the six-phase process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). First, the researchers familiarised themselves with the data through repeated reading of the transcripts. Second, relevant segments of the data were coded, focusing on how accountants describe their roles, responsibilities, and challenges. Third, these codes were grouped into broader themes that captured recurring patterns, particularly related to tensions between compliance and advisory roles. In the fourth phase, the themes were reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately reflected the data and were clearly distinguishable. Fifth, each theme was defined and named to capture its core meaning. Finally, the themes were integrated into the findings, supported by illustrative quotes from the interviews to enhance transparency and credibility. This analytical approach enabled the identification of nuanced patterns in how accountants interpret, negotiate, and perform their roles within SME contexts.

4.6 GDPR and Ethical Principles

This study involves the collection and processing of personal data, as interviews with accountants constitute identifiable information under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). In accordance with Lund University's guidelines for student theses, personal data was only collected to the extent necessary to fulfill the purpose of the study (Ekonomihögskolan, 2023). All participants were informed about the purpose of the study, how their data would be used, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequences. Informed consent was obtained prior to each interview. Participation was voluntary, and no sensitive personal data was intentionally collected.

To ensure confidentiality, all interview data was anonymised through pseudonymisation, meaning that names and any identifying details were removed or replaced with fictitious identifiers. This ensures that individual participants cannot be identified in the final thesis. Furthermore, the data was stored securely and was only accessible to the researchers. In line with GDPR principles, the collected data will not be stored longer than necessary and will be deleted after the completion of the study. Additionally, the study follows the principle of data minimisation, meaning that only relevant information required to answer the research question was collected (Ekonomihögskolan, 2023; EDPS, n.d.). Since the research focuses on professional roles rather than individuals, no unnecessary personal identifiers were included. By adhering to these principles, the study ensures that the handling of personal data is conducted in a lawful, ethical, and responsible manner.

5. Empirical Results and Analysis

In this chapter, the empirical results from the interviews are organised and analysed using four themes. The first section concerns the accountants' responsibilities and how they perceive their role. The second section examines how regulatory compliance affects their work and role. The third section discusses the accountants' perception of role ambiguity in their work. Lastly, the interviewees' use of communication and prioritisation strategies is analysed.

5.1 Bean Counter vs. Business Support

The empirical findings show variation in how accountants in SMEs perceive and identify their role, ranging from more traditional bean counter positions to broader business support roles. The definition of a bean counter used in this study was grounded in the literature review's characterisation of the role as primarily focused on traditional accounting tasks, such as bookkeeping, transaction recording, preparation of financial statements, account reconciliation, payroll administration, tax reporting, compliance monitoring, and financial control. In contrast, the modern business support role was defined as a more strategic and advisory-oriented function involving activities such as advising management, supporting strategic planning and decision making, budgeting and forecasting, performance analysis, and providing financial insights to support organisational growth and long-term objectives.

When the interviewees were asked to what extent they perceived their role as traditional versus strategic, interviewee B stated that they identified their role as traditional with the routine tasks and compliance that the literature describes, as well as interviewee G, and D that said that the majority of their work was traditional accounting. For example, interviewee D said that approximately 20% are business support and the rest traditional accounting tasks, but also said that "*I'm the only one in my role and I have a boss, and the roles are formed depending on how we are*". Interviewee B described responsibilities including cost analysis, month-end and year-end closing processes, reporting, as well as communication, planning, and follow-up activities with external auditors. Interviewee F, on the other hand, did not hold a primarily accounting-focused role within the company and therefore also had responsibilities outside the accounting function. The company had intentionally combined accounting responsibilities with this broader role, as it considered a dedicated accounting position unnecessary given the firm's relatively limited accounting needs. However, among the accounting-related tasks performed, the majority were associated with the traditional bean counter role, including bookkeeping and invoice management. The responsibilities included creating and distributing invoices, reassuring compliance with regulation and contact with Skatteverket.

Several respondents described their role as a combination of both traditional and strategic responsibilities, using expressions such as "*It's a mix of both*" or "*I'd say it's 50/50*". This relates to what Burns and Baldvinsdottir (2005) refers to as a hybrid accountant. Interviewees A, C, E, H, I, and J all expressed variations of this view. This perceived division of tasks aligns with Kite et al. (2023), who discuss how individuals may occupy multiple roles simultaneously, as well as the concept of the hybrid accountant described by Pierce and O'Dea (2003). For example, interviewee E highlighted both operational and strategic aspects of the role:

> *"It's mixed and I would say it's split between the operational, making everything work from an operational side and that's fundamental. So that needs to be done, but also strategically planning ahead, we're also handling the restructuring company, restructuring and supporting in partnership transactions, et cetera. and also its cost allocation and handling from a more strategic perspective as well"*

Unlike interviewee E, who described the role as broader and more strategic, interviewee B identified more strongly with the traditional accounting role and stated that "*making my role something else will not happen*". Interviewee G shared a similar view and also described their role in more traditional terms, explaining their tasks as:

> *"Today I work purely with all the accounting tasks that need to be done, daily accounting of accounts payable, accounts receivable, other bank bookings and so on."*

Interviewee G also described responsibilities such as preparing monthly and annual financial statements, handling Value Added Tax (VAT) and taxes, budgeting, inventory management, collaborating closely with the purchasing department, managing various projects assigned by management, and supporting stores and customer service. These tasks were similar to those described by interviewees D and E. However, interviewee D also had responsibility for payroll, while interviewee E held more finance-oriented responsibilities related to risk and product financing. Interviewees H, I, and J mentioned similar tasks, including reporting, communication with tax authorities, and Human Resources (HR) related responsibilities, but interviewee I also highlighted:

> *"I'm in charge of everything from the budgeting and follow-ups, and I also have the HR stuff because we are so small, so I do the payroll and have to make sure that everything that is reported to the authorities in every way is done. And in the role as CFO, I also sit in on all the board meetings."*

Interviewee A said their role is "*wide when it comes to what I do every day*" and mentioned responsibilities such as legal compliance, reporting, and ad hoc assignments depending on the company's needs. This points towards a more hybrid role that combines traditional accounting tasks with broader and more flexible responsibilities. Interviewee A further explained:

"There's never enough people to cover all of the needs that we have at all times. So we have to be a little bit flexible with what you can accomplish and sometimes it also means learning new things to be able to, you know, foresee the needs of the company."

This relates to the resource constraints often faced by SMEs where hiring new employees is not always the first option. Instead, they may choose to divide tasks among existing employees, which could help explain the wide variety of responsibilities described by the interviewees. While some interviewees viewed this variety of tasks as challenging, others found it enjoyable or stimulating. At the same time, almost all respondents mentioned that an advantage of working in a SME was gaining insight into the organisation as a whole. The resource constraints were also visible in interviewee C's company, where the organisation had prioritised expanding the more profitable parts of the business that directly generate revenue.

"Historically we've had a challenge with efficiency, productivity and so we had to keep the non-profitable part of the company, like me, - I just cost money. I don't bring any money in - as low as possible"

This helps explain why they are the only accountant in an organisation with around 90–100 employees. A similar view was expressed by interviewee F, whose company did not see a need for a large accounting department and had therefore chosen not to invest in hiring additional accountants. The impact of limited resources can also be seen in company E, where the respondent had been with the company since its early stages and was responsible for building the entire accounting function from scratch.

"So when I took over, there was no economy/accounting function at all. Everything was in invoices, nothing was digital, so all the invoices were in physical form and there was no accounting, actually. It was just transaction bookkeeping. So it was starting up everything from the bottom up and building the finance function."

From a role theory perspective, the combination of building the accounting role while simultaneously learning its associated expectations may influence how the role and its potential conflicts are perceived. As the role taking and role enactment happens, they adjust their expectations to fit the organisation, which can lead to less ambiguity, as explained by Biddle (1986), and Scott (2004). Interviewee A relates to this by saying that "*The role kind of* *has to evolve with you because you're creating the role*", and interviewee H also mentioned that the longer they worked in the company the better they got to know it and got more responsibilities.

Although there is a division of tasks, the business support role does not appear as a standalone function in any of the companies. When interviews were asked to what extent they are involved in strategic decision-making processes, interviewees A, B, D, E and H all talked about how they do not make any decisions but they support other functions and management by providing them with data and information so they can make informed decisions. Compared to interviewee C, who is solely responsible for the whole accounting function in the organisation emphasised more on the strategic part, and said *"I do a lot of reports, and a lot of strategic and business plans"*. Among the interviewees signs of the hybrid accountant role shows in the form of tasks more related to financial control, business support, strategic advising and operational involvement. Even if the interviewees do not make any decisions they are still involved in advising the rest of the organisation in financial matters.

Although interviewee G identified themselves primarily as a traditional accountant with clearly defined accounting responsibilities, they also described taking on occasional tasks assigned by management that were unrelated to accounting or finance. These included responsibilities such as managing the agreement portal, furnishing the new office, archiving sales documentation, purchasing packaging materials, and producing store-related items such as bags and wrapping materials. This suggests that the extent to which the role is perceived as strategic or operational depends on organisational conditions, including team size, resource availability, and the SME's business model. The findings indicate that the accountant's role is not uniformly shifting towards business support, but instead varies across organisational contexts and is shaped by specific organisational needs and expectations. Consequently, the role appears less as a fixed position and more as something constructed in practice, influenced by the organisation's structure, available resources, and the competencies of the individual accountant.

5.2 Regulatory Compliance as the Foundation of the Role

In all interviews, regulatory compliance emerged as the fundamental principle organising the accountant's role in Swedish SMEs. Compliance was not seen as just one of many things accountants do, but rather as the structural underpinning for everything else they do. When the interviewees were asked how regulatory requirements influenced their daily work, the majority of interviewees said that compliance was a routine part of daily work and was frequently performed unconsciously. Interviewee A described regulatory requirements as the following:

> *"It's the pillars that's gonna determine the base of your work. I think that you don't think about it on a daily basis because it's the ground that you stand on and then you work around that. It's like an autopilot. You're just doing it."*

This supports the notion that Sivabalachandran and Gooneratne (2023) discusses that compliance is not a single, isolated responsibility, but rather a central logic that shapes how accountants organise and prioritise their work. Interviewee C discussed this similar to interviewee A, that you do not think about the regulatory requirements on a day to day basis, but you *"always have it in the back of your head"*. Furthermore interviewee D mentioned that it is *"the backbone"* and *"the most important prioritisation"*. Interviewees E and F discussed the external stakeholders such as Skatteverket and auditors influence as something that *"sets the frame"* and often acts as advisors.

These findings support those found by Karlsson et al. (2019) in identifying accounting policies, regulations, and formal requirements as institutional regulative factors that define the role of the accountant. Throughout the interviews, each respondent continuously referenced legislations, deadlines, reporting obligations, and quality requirements as the least flexible elements of their job. Interviewee B stated that everyone, whether internal or external, expects reports to be prepared at a high level, emphasising the need to adhere to "*all our deadlines and of course, the law*". Interviewee H said "*you have a lot of regulation with the finance, everything needs to be done in a certain way*", and interviewee I further stated that they were accountable for "*everything that is submitted to the government in whatever way*", although they also handled budgeting, payroll, HR-related tasks, and board participation. These findings show how compliance-related duties continue to serve as the central focus of accountants' roles, even when the role includes additional operational and strategic duties.

The interviews further demonstrated that regulatory obligations directly affect the ways in which accountants allocate time to their work. Tax authority deadlines, audit timelines, reporting obligations, and financial closings were mentioned multiple times as being determinative of the priority items in practice when interviews were asked how they prioritise their work when faced with competing demands. Interviewee B stated that "*when we have a deadline from the tax authorities, then that's first*", and interviewee I explained that:

> *"There are some things like the VAT declaration that you can't skip until the next day, and then the other stuff just has to wait. So it's mostly about deadlines. Like, you plan your work around deadlines."*

This illustrates how external formal requirements dominate day-to-day priorities regardless of other organisational needs. Interviewee A described year-end closing processes as particularly intense due to the pressure imposed by auditors and reporting requirements, resulting in significant increases in workload in order to meet formal obligations within specified reporting periods. Additionally, interviewee G explained that:

> *"Over time, you learn how to prioritise what is most important. Tasks related to accounting and financial reporting generally take precedence, as they are consistently tied to strict deadlines, such as monthly closings, tax payments, and reporting requirements. In that sense, these responsibilities are always prioritised"*

Furthermore, interviewee C mention:

> *"Well, they expect me to deliver the numbers, essentially, and the prognosis to assess for the coming months and the year. They also expect me to pay our vendors on time, manage the incoming statements on time, keep track of what customers are not paying on time. So there's a lot of expectations. I think though, that they are subconscious expectations"*

This temporal aspect that the interviewees highlights extends regulatory compliance beyond simply following rules as mentioned by Karlsson et al. (2019) into following institutionalised timelines, cycles, deadlines, reporting periods, and recurring obligations. Compliance therefore appears to function not only as a procedural requirement but also as a temporal structure that shapes organisational priorities, at times overriding other responsibilities.

An important feature of these patterns relates to the manner in which external stakeholders reinforced compliance-related behavior. Auditors, owners, government agencies, and professional organisations all contributed to defining the role of the accountant. When asked how external stakeholders affect their work, interviewee B explained that they worked closely with auditors and stated that their audit experience made auditor expectations "*a part of my DNA*." Interviewee I talks about that it sometimes can be a challenge to work with auditors, but that you should see them as help:

> “*You ask them and you cooperate with them. I met some people that see them more or less like an enemy that wants to nail them. But I see them as a help.*”

Similarly, Interviewee A described how a recent change in ownership created "*more reporting and newer expectations*" which added new routines to the accounting department. Similar to respondent J, whose company was acquired by new management, leading to changes in routines accordingly. These findings support DiMaggio and Powell’s (1983) view on institutional theory, specifically coercive pressures from outside actors and formal structures that guide organisationally acceptable behaviors and promote adherence to established accounting practices.

Additionally, these findings indicate that accountants play a role as organisational gatekeepers protecting regulatory requirements when other members of the organisation are interested in pursuing options which conflict with compliance requirements. Interviewee B stated that there were occasions when operational management desired to pursue financially advantageous opportunities that would create potential problems related to VAT, requiring him to "*bring them back down to earth*" and provide explanations of the regulatory limitations for pursuing those options. Similarly, Interviewee I stated that although there might be internal discussions about how to address certain matters, ultimately "*there isn't much choice… because that's what the rules and regulations state*." Furthermore, Interviewee I indicated that in cases where disagreements continued to exist they would bring in external auditors to explain "*what we can do and what we cannot do."* This demonstrates how accountants not only fulfill compliance obligations themselves but also legitimise regulatory requirements inside the organisation.

While accountants' roles have been expanding due to advances in digitalisation, automation and artificial intelligence (AI), however, respondents did not see technological advancements as diminishing the importance of regulatory compliance. Instead respondents saw technology as having changed how regulatory compliance work is carried out. Interviewee B stated that one of the largest changes experienced by accountants was the result of increased use of digital accounting systems, while they identified using AI for processing supplier invoices and classifying accounting data as a new trend. However, interviewee B emphasised that they were "*only at the beginning stage*." Interviewee A reflected further on how regulators have not kept pace with rapid development in digital technologies, thus creating ambiguity related to best practices and relationships between evolving technology and existing accounting standards. Nonetheless, despite this ambiguity, respondents believed human oversight, professional judgment and regulatory accountability remained critical.

5.3 Low Role Ambiguity but High Role Flexibility

Despite the broad and multifaceted nature of the accountant's role in SMEs, the findings indicate a low level of perceived role ambiguity. While prior research emphasises role conflict (Sivabalachandran & Gooneratne, 2023), the findings of this study indicate that accountants in SMEs do not perceive their role as conflicting. When asked about conflicting expectations in their role, the interviewees rather described their work as involving multiple responsibilities that are handled as a natural part of their daily work. The interviewees generally understand what is expected of them, even though their responsibilities are wide-ranging and not strictly defined. Instead of experiencing confusion, respondents described a high degree of role flexibility, where they continuously shift between compliance tasks, ad hoc assignments, supporting other functions, and occasionally contributing to strategic activities.

In fact, the majority of respondents expressed that their daily work included a wide range of responsibilities in addition to financial control. For example, interviewee A explained that their role "*is quite wide as far as what I do every day*" and includes among other things, legal obligations, reporting and ad hoc assignments, which can be assigned by the company from time-to-time. Additionally, Interviewee I stated that they were responsible for a number of tasks such as, budgeting, payroll, HR-issues, reporting to authorities and attending meetings of the board of directors. As well as those tasks that are traditionally associated with the role of accountant. Interviewees D and E similarly reported that their roles included salary payments, risk financing and product financing. Furthermore, Interviewee G stated that in addition to tasks related to accounting they were also responsible for performing non-financial operations, such as purchasing office furniture, and providing supplies for stores. Overall these examples demonstrate the versatility of the accounting function within

SMEs. A comparison of the responsibilities between large and small companies is something interviewee A discusses:

> *"I think if we compare it to a bigger company because you have so many people in the same department and the role that you have has to be more defined. You have these kinds of assignments and then anything outside of that is not your responsibility. I think we have some other rules when it's smaller companies, you can't just have these limited amounts of assignments. And with that also comes the responsibility to make sure that things are rolling. And then other than that, you have to go above and beyond to exceed those expectations."*

Interviewee G further discusses the experience of working in a smaller company:

> *"When you work at a smaller company, you really have to make sure that we're all aligned. We always work together as a team and support each other, so I don't believe that we have different expectations on each other, but rather we are very, very aligned in what we do"*

With closer communication and understanding, as mentioned by Sivabalachandran and Gooneratne (2023) accountants adapt their roles dynamically depending on situational demands and organisational needs. In line with this, the findings further indicate that the organisational closeness within SMEs may contribute to clearer expectations and shared understanding of responsibilities. This flexibility is largely shaped by the SME context, where limited resources and organisational structures require employees to cover multiple functions. As respondent A mentioned earlier regarding the limited resources constraints noted, "*there's never enough people to cover all of the needs*," which necessitates adaptability and learning new skills to meet organisational demands. Such adaptability may reduce role ambiguity through closer communication and a stronger understanding of the operational context (Sivabalachandran & Gooneratne, 2023). Respondent B stated that "*there is expectation that we report with a high quality*".

From the normative institutional perspective, where Karlsson et al. (2019) discusses the expectations of managers and how it shapes the role. Respondent B, for example, discusses that there can be both external and internal expectations, and while the external expectations are always the same no matter who is the accountant, the internal expectations can vary depending on company where interviewee B mention that:

> *"internally, there's also an expectation to knowledge sharing, improving the ways of working with analysis and, well, knowledge sharing both within the finance function and to other functions"*

Interviewee D when asked the question about what expectations are put on them answered:

> *"I would say it's very strict and it's a bit different. I need to deliver to everybody on time and with quality. No question about it."*

This aligns with both interviewee B and H. Respondent E also mentions expectations about assurance that everything is handled with compliance and that risks are raised properly. Some different expectations that interviewee H mentions is that the stakeholders want the figures, while the management wants an explanation of what is behind the figures. Both interviewee H and I answered that they do not experience any conflicting expectations. On the other hand, interviewee A answered that there are conflicts *"whenever you have more assignments than time you have to finish it"*. Although interviewee A argued that it also depends on the company culture, and that if you have a good culture you can talk with colleagues and your boss to figure out the priorities. Interviewee C also said that there are no conflicting expectations, but that there can be situations where colleagues want them to do things without giving them the needed supporting documents.

To manage this interviewee D said that they *"have adapted my work flow to reduce the conflicts. Planning work is very, very important."*, furthermore they said that they no longer experience conflicts:

> *"I wouldn't say it's a conflict any longer. I would say that we have built up an understanding of what needs to be done. He understands that I need a lot of time to do the basic work and I understand that he needs information from me. And so we have found a way of processes and time and collaborating."*

While expectations from different actors may vary, particularly when operational managers request outputs without fully understanding the accountant's constraints, such situations are not experienced as clear role conflicts, but rather as differences in operational realities, such as limited time or lack of necessary data. From a role theory perspective (Biddle, 1986), this suggests that accountants are not primarily dealing with role ambiguity, but instead engage in managing multiple expectations in practice. Contrary to theoretical expectations that a wide range of tasks would lead to confusion (Sivabalachandran & Gooneratne, 2023), the findings indicate that accountants interpret this complexity as a normal and manageable aspect of their role. Interviewee B for example mentions:

> *“It's a quite small administration. We are very close to decisions. I can easily check with both the CFO and CEO, if I have some questions. I have a group accounting manager [...] We don't have that many conflicting expectations.”*

This suggests that the small power distance within the organisation contributes to reduced role ambiguity by facilitating close communication, easier access to decision-makers, and clearer alignment of expectations between employees and management. The organisational proximity appears to enable accountants to continuously clarify uncertainties and coordinate responsibilities, thereby reducing the likelihood of conflicting expectations despite the broad and flexible nature of their role.

Instead, the findings clearly indicate a high degree of flexibility in terms of roles. Many of the respondents stated that their roles varied according to organisational need. They switched back-and-forth between various tasks such as complying with regulations and laws, assisting operationally, producing reports, communicating with managers, and more. Interviewee C who essentially worked independently with accounting for a company with approximately 90-100 employees stated that "*I do all of it*" (accounting, reporting, business-planning, strategic supporting). Thus, flexibility becomes institutionalised within SMEs due to resource constraints and flat organisational structure.

A common theme throughout the interviews was that respondents differentiated between conflicting expectations and competing tasks. Interviewee B explained that their problem was not conflicting expectations, but rather "*competing tasks*." They stated that it was challenging sometimes to decide how to allocate time between two competing assignments. Similarly, interviewee A described situations like year-end closings as extremely busy and requiring difficult prioritisation decisions. However, interviewee A did not describe these as periods of uncertainty regarding their role. Rather, interviewee A relied on dialogue with colleagues, deadlines, and practical judgment about what needs to be addressed first. They also mentioned that:

> *“If you have a healthy company culture, there's not going to be a problem in sorting out which priorities you have.”*

Therefore, our findings suggest that accountants in SMEs face complex and demanding work environments characterised by workload pressures rather than ambiguity in their role. Additionally, our findings indicate that accountants' large scope of responsibilities are often seen as natural aspects of working in an SME environment rather than problematic. Interviewee A explained that smaller organisations require employees to perform "*beyond the call of duty*" to fulfill specific duties in order to keep "*the wheels turning*." Similarly, interviewee B explained that their department intentionally created a broad-based accounting function in order to allow employees to work across a variety of areas such as supplier relationships, VAT, accounting and financial statements. Our findings therefore suggest that flexibility is an inherent feature of SMEs.

Our findings offer a different perspective from the assumption made in prior literature that hybrid roles with a wide scope result in ambiguity or conflict in an employee's role from the role theory perspective (Biddle, 1986). Instead it appears that respondents have learned how to manage multiple expectations as an active component of their professional performance. Although different stakeholders may have different demands placed on employees, accountants generally understand their scope of responsibility and use communication, prioritising, and professional judgment to handle requests from stakeholders. Our findings therefore indicate that accountants in SMEs are not struggling with unclear roles, but rather are functioning in highly flexible roles within resource constrained organisational environments.

5.4 Structuring Work through Communication and Prioritisation

The empirical findings show that accountants continuously structure and organise their work through communication, prioritisation, and organisational support, as well as how they manage flexibility in practice. Rather than describing their role in terms of problems or tensions, the respondents emphasise the importance of handling multiple responsibilities as a natural part of their daily work. Communication is highlighted as a central element, where open dialogue with managers is used to clarify expectations, align priorities, and ensure that tasks are managed effectively. This supports previous research, which identifies communication as a key mechanism for reducing role ambiguity (Byrne & Pierce, 2018). For example, interviewee A explains that misunderstandings can occur and that they actively work to manage them in order to ensure mutual understanding:

> *"In many cases we can deliver what they're asking for, but we're speaking different languages. [...] We're actually actively working on finding common grounds, so it's going to become easier for us to understand what we mean [...] It's like an open dialogue you have to have and it usually requires some time and just more time to understand each other"*

This is something interviewees B, C, D, E and G agrees with, where interviewee C emphasises on the point that "*you need to be a good communicator and educator*" while interviewee E mentioned that:

> *"We're a small team, so we communicate. But of course there can be, especially when we're stressed, I might not fall to you and prioritise what my colleagues want to prioritise. [...] But we usually solve it together to say what, 'well how urgent this or the other topic', and we are understanding."*

Open communication with colleagues and the boss is something interviewee H mentions: *"You need to be able to tell your boss, 'okay, I'm not gonna be able to handle this'".* Similarly, interviewee B indicated that they had not experienced "*too many conflicting expectations*", mainly since the organisation was small and communication with the CFO and CEO was available and easy to access. Interviewee B's answer also aligned with what interviewees E and H discussed, that they always can talk to their manager if they need support. The organisational culture can influence how open the communication is, and in SMEs there is often a strong focus on teamwork. Organisational culture thereby plays an important role in enabling this process, as it allows accountants to seek guidance, redistribute tasks, and discuss workload with colleagues and management when needed. Another aspect to communication is trust, which Burns and Baldvinsdottir (2005) mentioned as an important strategy to manage expectations in the role of hybrid accountants. Trust is something that respondent D mentioned explicitly in the way that trust is something they have built up throughout the years. If questions arise, both respondent E and G stated that they can present the underlying facts, as "*the numbers speak their clear language*".

Interviewee E also talked about the way you present financial information matters and said "*be transparent and not over complicate. So I explain it as kind of a story, what's behind the figures*". Some methods interviewee H used to communicate financial information included using Excel and graphs to present the information in a simple and accessible way, as well as speaking directly with people and asking whether they understood it. The importance of keeping it simple and explaining it in other terms to avoid information overload is something that interviewee C and J discussed. Respondent I used a similar technique as respondent A in the company where they have agreed on a way to present financial information so that everyone understands.

Another method mentioned by the majority of the interviewees was maintaining open communication regarding the prioritisation of deadlines. For example, interviewee B highlighted the importance of being able to delegate tasks or postpone them when faced with multiple competing responsibilities, stating that "*at the end of the day, it's the deadlines that rule and lead us.*" This aligns with the strategy used by interviewee A, who also prioritised tasks based on deadlines, while emphasising the importance of not abandoning tasks completely, but instead returning to them later. Although interviewee C works alone in the accounting department, despite the company having nearly as many employees as the company of interviewee B, they are still able to delegate certain tasks to other functions during periods of high workload. For interviewees C and J, effective time management and prioritisation were considered essential, together with having a good understanding of what is urgent and what can be postponed. Interviewee D stated that the "*highest priority is to meet the legal demands [and] external deadlines,*" while interviewee G also emphasised deadlines, adding that "*with time and experience, you have learned to prioritise what's important.*" Similarly, interviewee H described prioritising external requirements, such as those from Skatteverket, before addressing the needs of management.

Although they also mentioned some flexibility with the prioritisation and the ability to move tasks around, but that they are tasks with set dates. An additional point that interviewee E discussed was that they prioritised what was important for the team, as well as that the CEO sometimes could push things that need to be prioritised. Although some different strategies for prioritisation are used in the different companies the main theme is still that they prioritise dynamically depending on what the company needs at that moment.

These findings suggest that role clarity in SMEs is not solely dependent upon formalised job descriptions, but rather is determined by proximity to others, communication, and informal coordination. Accountants rely on both managers and colleagues for direction and support, reflecting the collaborative nature of the work in SMEs. Therefore, structuring and organising work is an ongoing and integrated aspect of the accountant's role, where multiple responsibilities are handled as a natural part of everyday practice.

6. Discussion

The empirical findings show that accountants in Swedish SMEs do not consider themselves limited to the traditional bean counter role. Even though traditional accounting routine tasks such as bookkeeping, reporting, compliance, reconciliations, and financial control are still a large part of the job, the role of the accountant in SMEs also includes broader business support. Many interviewees stated that they supported CEO, managers, and various departments by providing financial data, explaining figures, preparing reports, and participating in decision-making processes. This shows that the accountant's role in SMEs is neither strictly traditional nor fully strategic, but instead reflects the hybrid accountant role presented in previous research.

One important finding of this study, however, is that this hybridity does not appear to result in the same degree of conflict or tension identified in previous studies of larger organisations. Earlier research often described compliance responsibilities and business support as potentially contradictory, particularly when accountants were expected to satisfy both financial managers' demands for control and operational managers' needs for flexible and forward-looking support. Such contradictions may create role conflict when different actors expect accountants to prioritise different tasks or responsibilities. In this study, however, although such contradictions were present, they were not experienced as strong role conflicts.

One explanation may be the SME context. Within smaller organisations there is less power distance, allowing accountants to work closely with management and operational staff through more direct and informal communication. Expectations are therefore continuously discussed and negotiated in daily work rather than separated across multiple organisational levels. This proximity, together with the collaborative culture often characterising SMEs, allows accountants to explain constraints, clarify priorities, and manage expectations before they develop into conflict. For example, tensions did develop during months when intense activity occurred (for example, month-end and year-end reporting). However, none of the accountants interviewed described it as role conflict, instead, they described them as typical workload issues that were resolvable through open communication and prioritising tasks. Several respondents explained that managing these situations became easier with experience, as they learned how to prioritise their work and navigate organisational demands more effectively. Due to the relatively small size of SMEs, accountants are often heavily involved in both management decisions and operational activities, and have direct contact with those responsible for setting expectations appears to reduce confusion regarding priorities. This further supports the notion that hybrid accounting roles in SMEs involve continuous negotiations and coordinating of roles and responsibilities as opposed to conflicting expectations. Rather than receiving vague or conflicting directions from upper management, accountants communicate directly with managers and explain what is feasible based on workload, time, and regulatory requirements. Communication therefore becomes not only a coordination mechanism, but also a way of continuously aligning expectations throughout the organisation.

The role of the accountants was also to simplify financial communication so that it could be understood by non-financial managers. Thereby many of the respondents stated that they translate financial information into more operational language, visualised numerical data, and used simple accounting wording. Therefore, this shows that the business support element of the hybrid role does not only provide financial information but also interprets and communicates financial information to enable organisational understanding and decision making. In this respect, communication forms a critical component of the professional competence of the accountant rather than just being viewed as an administration task.

Another explanation is that hybrid roles appear normalised within SMEs. Due to limited resources, employees in smaller companies are expected to take on broad and flexible responsibilities. The interviewees therefore did not describe additional tasks as unusual or as a threat to their professional role, but rather as a natural part of working in an SME. In this sense, the hybrid role was not experienced as a contradiction between separate identities, but as one integrated and practical role shaped by organisational needs. Compliance also differed from what might be expected. Although regulatory requirements were described as central and non-negotiable, they were not experienced as restrictive. Instead, compliance functioned as the foundation that structured the accountants' work. Deadlines, laws, and reporting obligations provided clarity and legitimacy when communicating with other parts of the organisation.

The findings also suggest that the accountant's role in SMEs is strongly influenced by organisational development and by how accountants themselves shape their role over time.

There exists a co-creative relationship in SMEs between how accountants construct their role through the enactment of their responsibilities and how organisational factors create expectations regarding what should be included in the role. Several respondents stated that they helped build the accounting function or joined the company during periods of growth and organisational change. As a result, the role was not formally established beforehand, instead, they learned about expectations through performing their role, while organisational structures, resource constraints, and operational needs concurrently shaped the role itself, which developed gradually together with the organisation. From a role theory perspective, this suggests that role expectations evolve through continuous interaction between the accountant and the organisation. Through these interactions, accountants learn what is required of them by the organisation while simultaneously developing and applying routines and responsibility frameworks that reflect organisational expectations within day-to-day operations. It appears that this co-creative process contributes to both the flexible nature of the role and the relatively low levels of perceived role ambiguity found in this study.

In addition to the apparent lack of identifiable role conflict, this study suggests that unresolvable conflicts between expectations may still occur. However, accountants appear to have developed various strategies to minimise or prevent these contradictions from developing into clearly defined role conflicts. Communication, prioritisation, and operational closeness have been identified as important strategies for reducing tensions associated with hybrid accounting roles, and the empirical findings of this study directly reflect these practices. Respondents frequently described maintaining open communication with supervisors and colleagues to clarify misunderstandings, negotiate deadlines, explain limitations, and coordinate expectations with both managerial and operational staff. Trust also emerged as an important factor explaining why hybrid roles in SMEs are perceived as manageable. Through continuous interaction over time, employees and supervisors develop familiarity, mutual understanding, and trust in one another’s professional judgement and abilities. Furthermore, deadlines related to legal and regulatory obligations were consistently prioritised above organisational demands and functioned as the primary organising framework for the accountants’ activities. Managerial requests were generally prioritised next, while requests from other departments were assessed based on urgency, workload, and available time. This illustrates how accountants rely on practical prioritisation and ongoing communication, rather than formalised role definitions, to manage competing organisational demands.

Unlike much of the previous research on hybrid accounting roles, the findings instead reflect role flexibility, where additional responsibilities complemented one another and were perceived as providing more benefits than disadvantages. Compliance-based knowledge strengthened accountants' ability to support management, while operational involvement improved their understanding of the business and enabled more effective communication of financial information. From a role theory perspective, this suggests that role taking and role enactment evolve continuously through organisational interactions and experiences. The findings further indicate that accountants' role enactment in SMEs is highly situation-specific, as accountants regularly moved between compliance responsibilities, operational support, HR-related tasks, reporting, and strategic activities depending on organisational needs at a given point in time. Furthermore, viewing the results through institutional theory, indicates how institutional forces shape both how accountants view and perform their role. Regulatory pressure was the most important factor influencing accountants due to laws, reports, taxes, deadlines and more, forming the backbone of the accountant's role. Normative influence was also apparent through expectation relating to communication, team work, availability, and organisational support. Cognitive elements such as professional judgment, experience and personal preference influenced how accountants interpret their responsibilities. Therefore, these three institutional dimensions interactively contributed to the formation of the hybrid accountant role in SMEs.

In conclusion, this study provides new insights into how accountants in Swedish SMEs understand their professional roles. Previous studies have primarily concentrated on large organisations, where formal systems and separate departments create clear distinctions between operational and financial functions. This study demonstrates how hybrid accounting roles evolve in organisations characterised by limited resources, organisational closeness and flexible responsibilities. Furthermore, using a qualitative approach and semi-structured interviews allows for a more profound understanding of how accountants themselves describe, perceive and manage their changing role in practice. Nonetheless, there are several limitations to this study. Firstly, the relatively low number of cases limits the applicability generalisability of the findings. Secondly, the use of an interview methodology implies that respondents may portray their role positively and underplay tensions and problems faced when describing their role. Despite these restrictions, the findings add value to previous research by demonstrating that hybrid roles in SMEs are generally perceived as unambiguous and conflictual. In contrast, ambiguity appears to decrease due to close proximity, informal exchange of ideas and trust and continued discussion of expectations. From an institutional theory perspective, the study also illustrates that regulative, normative, cognitive institutional pressures in SMEs act synergistically as layers rather than mutually exclusive logics.

Lastly, the study has practical implications for managers and organisations. Managers recognising the breadth, flexible of accountants' role in SMEs will likely gain an appreciation for the demands imposed upon accounting functions in terms of workload, and expectations by the organisation. The study demonstrates that communication is an effective method to alleviate potential conflicts and tensions resulting from competing tasks, duties and priorities. Enhancing open communication between accountants, managers, and operational staff could thus reinforce mutual understanding, promote more realistic expectations, and ultimately enhance organisational decision-making processes.

7. Conclusions

This study aimed to investigate how Swedish accountants in SMEs perceive their role and navigate multiple expectations related to business support, regulatory compliance, and organisational demands. The findings show that the accountant's role is characterised as the hybrid accountant role, where traditional compliance responsibilities coexist with broader operational and advisory tasks. Rather than experiencing these expectations as conflicting, accountants describe them as integrated components of their everyday work, shaped by the organisational context and the practical realities of SME environments.

A central conclusion is that regulatory compliance forms the non-negotiable foundation of the role. Across all cases, compliance was described as the most stable and least flexible aspect of the job, structuring priorities, time allocation, and accountability. This confirms the dominance of the regulative institutional pillar and demonstrates that, even as roles expand, compliance remains the core around which other responsibilities are organised.

At the same time, the study shows that accountants in SMEs operate with a high degree of role flexibility but low role ambiguity. Despite having broad task responsibilities, including HR, payroll, budgeting, reporting, operational support, and ad hoc assignments, respondents did not express uncertainty regarding their role. Instead, expectations were understood through proximity, communication, prioritisation, and shared organisational norms rather than through formal job descriptions. This low power distance and close communication indicate that the culture within SMEs is more closely knit. Another important finding is that communication and prioritisation function as the primary mechanisms through which accountants manage multiple expectations. Open dialogue with managers, collaborative problem-solving, and the use of deadlines as structuring tools enable accountants to navigate workload pressures without perceiving them as role conflicts. These practices illustrate how role enactment is negotiated in real time and how organisational culture supports clarity despite broad responsibilities. The findings therefore challenge prior research linking hybrid roles to ambiguity and conflict, suggesting instead that hybridity in SMEs is normalised and embedded within everyday organisational practice.

Taken together, the findings contribute to the literature on the role of the hybrid accountant. From a role-theory perspective, the study demonstrates that hybrid roles in SMEs do not inherently produce conflict, instead, accountants engage in active role construction, using communication, judgement, and prioritisation to integrate multiple expectations. They gradually construct and develop their role through everyday work practices while engaging in role taking and role enactment as the organisation evolves. Role taking and role enactment thus occur through on-going organizational activities and experiences and thus are simultaneous. From an institutional view point it can be seen how the regulators, norms and cognition for institutions to operate exist and work together. However due to the size of SMEs, the three logics that drive this process layer upon one another instead of competing with each other. This results in a hybrid form of pragmatism, as role compliant anchors the role, however the scope of the role will be determined by what the organization requires and what the individual has developed competency.

Overall, this study concludes that the accountant in Swedish SMEs is best understood as a compliance‑anchored hybrid professional who navigates multiple expectations through flexibility, communication, and practical judgement. The role is neither fully traditional nor fully business‑partner oriented, but instead reflects the unique demands and resource constraints of SME contexts.

8. Future Research

Future research on hybrid accountants in SME is still needed. Current literature contains a gap between how SMEs use hybrid accountants and what role they perform. Results of this study differ from other studies regarding low levels of perceived role conflict and ambiguity by accountants in Swedish SMEs. These findings suggest that organisational structure, size, culture, proximity to organisation may affect how role expectations are developed and managed. Future studies could determine if the same patterns will also occur in larger organisations with informal coordination and close interpersonal relationships.

Additionally, further studies could be completed which examined the various institutional factors in depth, particularly cognitive factors and how accountants themselves interpret their own role through everyday organisational interactions. Such a study may lead to additional discussion on how regulative, normative and cognitive drivers interact together to shape hybrid accountant roles. In addition, organisational culture emerged as a potentially important variable for accountants' role expectations, communication pattern and role flexibility. It would therefore benefit from further study.

Another valuable direction for future studies would be to complete multiple interviews within each organization including accountants, managers and non-financial employees. Such an approach would provide a more holistic understanding of how role expectations are developed and negotiated between organisational actors. It would also provide an opportunity for researchers to compare how accountants perceive their own role against how managers and colleagues perceive the accountant's role within the organisation.

Additionally, cross national studies across industries with varied degrees of regulatory intensity and studies conducted within different national contexts could provide additional insight into how contextual factors affect the role of hybrid accountants in SMEs. This could show if our results are specific to the Swedish work environment or if the results can be replicated in other countries.

9. Reference List

Anglin, A.H., Kincaid, P.A., Short, J.C. & Allen, D.G. (2022). Role Theory Perspectives: Past, Present, and Future Applications of Role Theories in Management Research. *Journal of Management*, 48(6), pp. 1469-1502, https://doi.org/10.1177/01492063221081442

Balzano, M., Marzi, G. & Turzo, T. (2025). SMEs and institutional theory: major inroads and opportunities ahead. *Management Decision*, 63(13), pp. 1-27, https://doi.org/10.1108/MD-05-2023-0734

Bernard, H. R. (2012). Social Research Methods: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches, 2nd edn, Los Angeles: SAGE Publications.

Biddle, B. J. (1986). Recent Developments in Role Theory. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 12(1), pp. 67-92, https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.so.12.080186.000435

Berthod, O. (2016). Institutional Theory of Organizations, in Farazmand, A. (eds), *Global Encyclopedia of Public Administration*, *Public Policy, and Governance*, Springer Cham, pp. 1-5.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), pp. 77-101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Bryman, A., Bell, E. & Harley, B. (2024). Företagsekonomiska forskningsmetoder. 4th edn, Stockholm: Liber.

Burns, J. & Baldvinsdottir, G. (2005). An institutional perspective of accountants' new roles - the interplay of contradictions and praxis. *European Accounting Review*, 14(4), pp. 725-757, https://doi.org/10.1080/0963818050019417l

Burns, J. & Scapens, R.W. (2000). Conceptualizing management accounting change: an institutional framework. *Management Accounting Research*, 11(1), pp. 3-25, https://doi.org/10.1006/mare.1999.0119

Byrne, S. & Pierce, B. (2018). Exploring management accountants’ role conflicts and ambiguities and how they cope with them. *Qualitative Research in Accounting & Management*, 15(4), pp. 410-436, https://doi.org/10.1108/QRAM-11-2016-0083

Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches, 4th edn, Los Angeles: SAGE.

DiMaggio, P. J., & Powell, W. W. (1983). The Iron Cage Revisited: Institutional Isomorphism and Collective Rationality in Organizational Fields. *American Sociological Review*, 48(2), pp. 147-160, https://doi.org/10.2307/2095101

Easterby-Smith, M., Thorpe, R. & Jackson, P. (2012). Management Research, 4th edn, London: SAGE.

European Data Protection Supervisor (EDPS). (n.d.). D. https://www.edps.europa.eu/data-protection/data-protection/glossary/d_en [Accessed 24 April 2026]

Ekonomifakta (2025). Företagens storlek. https://www.ekonomifakta.se/sakomraden/foretagande/naringslivet/foretagens-storlek_1212719.html [Accessed 3 April 2026]

Ekonomihögskolan (2023). Riktlinjer för behandling av personuppgifter i studentarbeten vid Ekonomihögskolan. https://www.ehl.lu.se/sites/ehl.lu.se/files/2024-02/riktlinjer-personuppgifter-studentarbeten-2023.pdf

European Commission. (n.d.). SME definition. https://single-market-economy.ec.europa.eu/smes/sme-fundamentals/sme-definition_en [Accessed 24 April 2026]

Goretzki, L., Strauss, E. & Weber, J. (2013). An institutional perspective on the changes in management accountants' professional role. *Management Accounting Research*, 24(1), pp. 41-63, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.mar.2012.11.002

Karlsson, B., Hersinger, A. & Kurkkio, M. (2019). Hybrid accountants in the age of the business partner: exploring institutional drivers in a mining company. *Journal of Management Control*, 30, pp. 185-211, https://doi.org/10.1007/s00187-019-00280-1

Kite, M.E., Whitley, JR, B.E. & Wagner, L.S. (2023). Psychology of Prejudice and Discrimination, 4 edn, Abingdon: Routledge.

Lambert, C. & Sponem, S. (2012). Roles, Authority and Involvement of the Management Accounting Function: A Multiple Case-study Perspective. *European Accounting Review*, 21(3), pp. 565-589, https://doi.org/10.1080/09638180.2011.629415

Meyer, J. W., & Rowan, B. (1977). Institutionalized organizations: Formal structure as myth and ceremony. American Journal of Sociology, 83, pp. 340‑363. https://doi.org/10.1086/226550

Pierce, B. & O'Dea, T. (2003). Management accounting information and the needs of managers. Perceptions of managers and accountants compared. *The British Accounting Review*, 35(3), pp. 257-290, https://doi.org/10.1016/S0890-8389(03)00029-5

Scott, W. R. (2004). Institutional theory: Contributing to a theoretical research program, in Smith, G. & Hitt, M. (eds), *Great Minds in Management: The Process of Theory Development*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Sivabalachandran, T. & Gooneratne, T. (2023). Roles at crossroads: complexities and conflicts surrounding management accountants' roles based on evidence from the Sri Lankan context. *Asian Journal of Accounting Research*, 8(1), pp. 80-93, https://doi.org/10.1108/AJAR-11-2021-0242

Weigel, C. & Hiebl, M.R.W. (2023). Accountants and small businesses: toward a resource-based view. *Journal of Accounting & Organizational Change*, 19(5), pp. 642-666, https://doi.org/10.1108/JAOC-03-2022-0044

Wolf, T., Kuttner, M., Feldbauer-Durstmüller, B. & Mittner, C. (2020). What we know about management accountants' changing identities and roles - a systematic literature review. *Journal of Accounting & Organizational Change*, 16(3), pp. 311-347, https://doi.org/10.1108/JAOC-02-2019-0025

10. Appendix

Appendix A - Interview Questions

1. Can you tell us a bit about yourself?
    - How long have you worked as an accountant, and how long have you been with your current company?
2. Could you briefly describe the size and industry of your organisation?
    - How many work in the accounting department?
3. What does the accounting function look like within your company?
4. Can you describe your current role and responsibilities within your organisation?
5. How has your role evolved over time?
6. To what extent do you perceive your role as traditional (focused on compliance and bookkeeping) versus strategic (focused on business support and decision making)?
7. What competencies are most important for succeeding in your role today?
8. What expectations are placed on you by management and other stakeholders?
    - How do expectations differ between financial managers, operational managers, and external stakeholders?
9. How do regulatory requirements influence your daily work?
10. To what extent are you involved in strategic planning or decision-making processes?
11. Have you experienced conflicting expectations in your role? If so, can you provide an example?
    - How do such conflicts affect your work and decision making?
12. Do you ever experience uncertainty regarding what is expected of you? Please elaborate.
13. How do you prioritise when faced with competing demands?
    - What strategies do you use? What resources or organisational support help you handle your responsibilities effectively?
14. Have these conflicts changed over time?
15. How do regulations, professional standards, and organisational norms shape your role?
16. To what extent do external stakeholders, such as auditors or authorities, influence your work?
17. Have you experienced pressure to conform to industry practices or professional standards?
18. How do you communicate financial information to non-financial managers?
    - Can you recall a situation where you had to negotiate or defend your professional judgement?
19. What advantages and challenges do you experience as an accountant in an SME?
    - How do you see the role of accountants evolving in the future? What skills will be most important for accountants in the coming years?
20. Is there anything else you would like to add regarding your role or experiences?
21. Do you have any questions or reflections about this study?

Appendix B - Use of AI-tools

AI has been used to check language, suggest rewordings and synonyms, as well as provide advice on the structure. It has been used to generate ideas for interview questions, but the final selection of questions was made by the authors. Scopus AI has been used to find relevant research articles for the literature review, and this was complemented with manual searches for literature. ChatGPT, Copilot, and Scopus AI are the AI tools that have been used. While using AI tools, critical thinking and human judgement have been applied to ensure an ethical approach.