

# **BEYOND FINANCIAL STATEMENTS: NAVIGATING IDENTITY IN THE ERA OF TECHNOLOGICAL EVOLUTION**

**A CASE STUDY ABOUT MANAGEMENT ACCOUNTANTS  
AND HOW THEY RELATE THEMSELVES TO EVOLVING  
TECHNOLOGY**

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**Beyond financial statements: Navigating identity in the era of technological evolution – A case study about management accountants and how they relate themselves to evolving technology**

Abstract

This paper explores how management accountants construct themselves in the light of evolving technology. Existing research claims that technologies affect the role of management accountants, commonly referred to as a transition towards a business partner role (Andreassen, 2020; Carlsson-Wall, Goretzki, Hoftstedt, Kraus & Nilsson, 2022; Goretzki, Strauss, & Weber, 2013; Järvenpää, 2007). Nevertheless, the identity perspective of management accountants in an IT context has received insignificant attention in previous literature. Through a single case study with management accountants in a multinational media group, we seek to provide a clearer picture of how the individual management accountant reacts to and handles the different concerns and expectations potentially arising from technological advancements. In particular, the analysis is focused on the interplay between the digitalization discourse, the role script of management accountants, and their self-identity, which is constructed through identity work (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Watson, 2008). The empirical findings suggest that management accountants internalize the digitalization discourse into their identity. In particular, the empirics reveal that management accountants use digital tools as identity work resources to internalize the digitalization discourse but also to distance themselves from a full internalization. Further, we find evidence that the management accountant's social identity has implications for internalizing the digitalization discourse.

Keywords:

Management accountants, evolving technology, digitalization discourse, roles, identity work

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## 1. Introduction

Organizations are experiencing a transformation driven by rapid advancements in technology. From enterprise resource planning (ERP) systems to big data and artificial intelligence (AI), evolving technologies are reshaping the way we work, communicate, and conduct business. These technologies rapidly transform organizations and raise concerns about the future of the management accounting profession. In a survey of 161 Institute of Management Accountants (IMA) members, 42% were somewhat worried, and 5% were extremely worried about emerging technologies (Krumwiede, 2017). This paper aims to examine how management accountants within a multinational media company construct themselves in the light of evolving technology and how they make sense of the IT tools offered at their workplace. Management accounting in this study is defined as follows “[...] involves partnering in management decision making, devising planning and performance management systems, and providing expertise in financial reporting and control to assist management in the formulation and implementation of an organization’s strategy” (The Institute of Management Accountants, 2008), and a management accountant can be considered as the task carrier of management accounting practices.

Previous literature indicates Information Technologies’ (IT) power in shaping individuals’ roles and identities within organizations (Firk, Gerhke & Wolff, 2024; Nach, 2015). As organizations strive to remain competitive in the digital age, management accountants are expected to adapt and evolve alongside technological innovations (Parks, 2024). Within the domain of management accounting, advancements in technology have changed the way financial information is collected, utilized, and analyzed. Several scholars claim a relationship between IT and the role of management accountants, which is commonly discussed in terms of the bean counter vs business partner (Andreassen, 2020; Burns & Baldvinsdottír, 2005; Carlsson-Wall, Goretzki, Hoftstedt, Kraus & Nilsson, 2022; Carlsson-Wall & Strömsten, 2018; Goretzki, Strauss, & Weber, 2013; Järvenpää, 2007). From an identity point of view, only limited research has been conducted within the management accounting domain and in relation to IT. Heinzelmann (2018) investigates the implications of IT on management accountants’ identity from a regulatory perspective, however, the discursive perspective remains uninvestigated. In organizations, evolving technology encompasses not only the regulatory aspect, such as new routines and processes, but also a normative aspect, including values, beliefs, hopes, and concerns. Existing literature about the constantly evolving technology demonstrates a digitalization discourse (Andreassen, 2020; Cavélius, Endenich & Zicari’s, 2020; Firk et al., 2024; Frey & Osborne, 2017; Moll & Yigitbasioglu, 2019; Sundström, 2024) and the aim of this study is to explore the discursive implications on management accountants’ identity, including norms, expectations, and concerns, leading to the following research question:

How do management accountants construct themselves in the light of evolving technology?

To examine this concern, we draw upon data from a single case study in a multinational media company. Analytically, we use Watson's (2008) framework to understand the relationship between the digitalization discourse, the role of management accountants and the self-identity of the management accountant. Additionally, we use ideas from Alvesson & Willmott (2002) and Giddens (1991) to define and make distinctions between concepts. Our empirical findings suggest an existing digitalization discourse within the case company that forms the management accountant's identity. As opposed to previous literature that mostly focuses on role changes, and only implicitly on identity changes, our study explicitly explores IT implications on the management accountant's identity. Our findings illustrate how management accountants internalize the digitalization discourse into their identity. The empirics reveal that management accountants use the digital tools offered as identity work resources to internalize the digitalization discourse but also to distance themselves from a full internalization. In addition, our findings add nuance to the, yet limited, literature on the relationship between IT and the identity of management accountants (Heinzelmann, 2018; Morales & Lambert, 2013; Rautiainen, Scapens, Järvenpää, Auvinen, & Sajasalo, 2024), by adding one dimension. With support from Watson's (2008) framework in our analysis, we illustrate that the management accountant's social identity affects the way he/she internalizes the digitalization discourse. Our findings suggest that the internalization of the digitalization discourse differs between different management accountants as a result of their different role scripts.

The remainder of this paper has the following structure: In chapter two, we review relevant literature on the changing role and identity of management accountants in relation to evolving technology. In chapter three, the research design is outlined. Our empirical analysis follows in the fourth chapter. In chapter five our concluding discussion presents the main findings of our study, as well as limitations and suggestions for future research.

## 2. Literature review

In the following section, previous research on the changing role of management accountants in the light of evolving technology is presented. Firstly, an overview of the changing role of management accountants is presented, including a description of different role definitions and how they relate to the identity of management accountants. Secondly, an overview of the evolving technology on management accountants' role and identity is outlined. At the end of this chapter, the theoretical framework is presented, which will be used in the analysis in order to explore further insights from the gathered data.

### 2.1. Changing roles of management accountants

Previous literature discusses how the role of management accountants is changing in response to evolving organizational needs and advancements in digital technology. Linton (1936) defines role as “a set of behaviors linked to the inhabited status”. The term has been discussed in modern science since then, and researchers generally refer to roles as external norms and behavior expectations related to a social position and look outward to the interaction arrangement in an organizational setting (Biddle, 1979; Chreim, Williams & Hinings, 2007; Goretzki et al., 2013). When shifts in management accountants' roles occur, it is not just about obtaining external legitimacy; professionals must also internalize a new role script that relates to their identity (Goretzki et al., 2013; Järvenpää, 2007). Roles and identities can be regarded as two sides of the same coin: Self-identity is the individual's notion of who and what they are while role is the cultural, discursive, or institutional notions of who or what any individual might be (Chreim et al., 2007; Goretzki et al., 2013). Identity focuses on self-definition and encompasses the internalized meanings and expectations associated with a role (Chreim et al., 2007; Goretzki et al., 2013). According to Giddens (1991), self-identity is to be considered as a reflexively organized narrative, created as a result of participation in different competing discourses and experiences.

Simon, Kozmetsky, Guetzkow, & Tyndall (1954) have portrayed management accountants as problem-solvers, scorekeepers, and attention directors. The problem-solving role includes supplying business unit managers with information relevant to decision-making, while scorekeeping and attention directors are more centered around reporting. More recent studies commonly highlight two distinct roles of management accountants: bean-counters and business partners (Byrne & Pierce 2007; Friedman & Lyne, 2001; Järvenpää, 2007). Bean-counters, on the one hand, are focused on practical, operational tasks such as keeping accounts, conducting compliance reporting, and other control-type issues (Burns & Baldvinsdóttir, 2005). Business partners, on the other hand, are associated with tasks of more strategic character, involved in decision-making processes, business analysis and problem-solving activities (Burns & Baldvinsdóttir,

2005). This potential shift from so-called bean counter to business partner exemplifies the evolving role of management accountants (Byrne & Pierce, 2007; Friedman & Lyne, 2001; Järvenpää, 2007). Wolf, Kuttner, Feldbauer-Durstmüller & Mitter (2020) challenge the common distinction between bean counter and business partner, by arguing that the role of management accountants is hybrid as they are involved in bean-counting and business partnering simultaneously, indicating multiple identities. The tasks associated with a bean counter are what Morales & Lambert (2013) would refer to as “dirty” (Hughes, 1951), standard and undesirable tasks. The clean work, in contrast, is attributed to the business partner and implies desirable tasks such as supporting activities for the management (Hughes, 1951; Morales & Lambert, 2013). Accountants are often required to undertake duties that contradict their aspirational identity; these dirty works symbolize a form of misrecognition. Based on the concept of clean and dirty work, Morales & Lambert (2013) find that management accountants’ striving toward business partners creates tensions because it may mitigate some of the dirty work but instead increases other types of dirty work. Accordingly, Morales & Lambert’s (2013) findings indicate a hybrid role script of management accountants, congruent with Wolf et al. (2020).

As demonstrated in this section, the changing role of management accountants is widely discussed and it can be constructed in different ways, yet few studies link the suggested roles to the individual identity. One of them is Morales & Lambert (2013), discussing the tensions between the idealized identity and the existing identity of management accountants. Goretzki et al. (2013) explain the link between role changes and identity reconstruction, arguing that organizational actors can drive the institutionalization of the business partner role and identity reconstruction of management accountants.

## 2.2. IT as a change driver for management accountants

Scholars within the field of management accounting present numerous factors as catalysts for the changing role of management accountants, including implementing modern control systems, official value statements, and role modeling (Goretzki et al., 2013; Järvenpää, 2007). A particularly prominent driver for change is IT systems (Järvenpää, 2007; Quattrone, 2016; Wolf et al., 2024). Technology is portrayed as a change driver both within the academic world but also in practice. Deloitte (2020) and Parks (2024) discuss the future of management accountants in a practical context, acknowledging the traditional importance of management accountants in providing essential financial support but also their need to evolve beyond routine tasks and become proactive partners in driving business performance. Similar discussions are taking place among researchers, and below, we will present the literature on evolving technology and its implications for management accountants.

### 2.2.1. Enterprise resource planning systems

Historically, the accounting profession has developed in line with IT developments (Porter & Heppelmann, 2014). During the last three decades, management accountants have used ERP systems; software solutions that integrate and manage business processes within a single unified platform (Carlsson-Wall & Strömsten, 2018). Heinzelmann (2018) indicates that IT systems are a significant driver of management accountants' work processes. However, the literature shows ambiguous outcomes of the management accountants' use of ERP. Congruent with Morales & Lambert (2013), Heinzelmann (2018) argues that the implementation of the ERP system does not necessarily drive management accountants toward business partner roles and analysis but rather, the ERP system creates more routine work and reporting. Contradictory, the management accountant is understood as having a key role in the organization's economic success and is portrayed as value-adding and profit-optimizing. Hence, there is a gap between the enacted role and the understanding of the role, and the reason why the business partner role may not take place in practice can be explained by the ERP system (Heinzelmann, 2018). Goretzki et al. (2013) argue that management accountants can position themselves with help from the ERP system, indicating the ERP system can drive the role change. By restricting access to the information provided by the information system, they can ensure that others do not misinterpret the information and simultaneously position themselves as gatekeepers in relation to the ERP system (Goretzki et al., 2013).

Carlsson-Wall et al. (2022) further illustrate the complexity of ERP systems related to the business partner role. The authors show that the same (Cloud-based) ERP system and its features of centralization and standardization have opposite effects on management accountants within the same company. The CERP system, on the one hand, enabled central management accountants to be more efficient and to focus on business-oriented activities. In contrast, the less flexible characteristics of the CERP system implied challenges for the local management accountants to adapt to local knowledge and circumstances, hindering them from acting as business partners. Congruent with these outcomes is Andreassen's (2020) study, which exemplifies how digital technology contributes to narrowing the role of divisional management accountants while the role at group level becomes business-oriented. Carlsson-Wall et al.'s. (2022) and Andreassen's (2020) findings about the local management accountants' limitations to act as business partners can further be understood through the findings of Goretzki et al. (2018). They highlight the importance of taking local demands into account when implementing a standardized accounting system in order to satisfy local management accountants. In particular, the authors describe the relevance of a vernacular accounting system (VAS) – a local heterogeneous system – to serve as a reference point and knowledge transformation when developing and evaluating a standardized system on a global level. This local reference point was potentially discarded in the cases presented by Carlsson-Wall et al. (2022) and Andreassen (2020), resulting in unintended outcomes. Goretzki et

al. (2018) refer to Excel as a typical example of a VAS; its flexible characteristics enable the management accountants to customize their work according to local preferences.

The ambiguity surrounding the impact of technological advancements, such as ERP implementation, on management accountants' role underscores the need for a deeper understanding of how technology influences the individual management accountant.

Nach (2015) explores how individuals respond when their identity is challenged by computerized information systems in organizational settings. The author reveals the intricate interplay between technology and identity, highlighting that these systems can disrupt established routines and hierarchies, prompting either user adaptation or resistance. Successful adaptation involves individuals developing a new understanding of their identity that aligns with the capabilities of the new IT infrastructure. (Nach, 2015). However, other individuals disassociate themselves from the meanings brought by IT if they perceive the tool as constraining in supporting their professional practice (Nach, 2015). Heinzelmann (2018) brings the IT identity discussion into a management accounting context, referring to the IT system as a method for establishing management accountants' appropriate behavior within the organization. Except for Heinzelmann (2018), the link between identity and technology remains an under-researched issue in a management accounting context. Moreover, Heinzelmann (2018) explores the implications of an ERP system, and given the continuous development of newer technologies, suggests that further research is necessary to understand the evolving implications of technology on the identity of management accountants.

#### 2.2.2. Digitalization

The currently evolving technological advancement is commonly referred to as digitalization (Knudsen, 2020). In this era, ERP systems have become integrated with digital robots, AI, and customized CRM systems, and accounting information has become integrated with both internal and external data (Carlsson-Wall & Strömsten, 2018). The digital transformation is evolving, and the impact of digitalization on management accountants is unclear, yet previous research indicates ambiguous views. Cavélius et al. (2020) findings illustrate the complexity of reviewing the effects of digitalization on management accountants. On the one hand, they argue that digital transformation can create new opportunities for management accountants in terms of improved data availability, but on the other hand, they indicate that digital transformation brings a danger that management accountants need to engage more in a technician's tasks rather than a business partner's tasks. From Morales & Lambert's (2013) point of view, the technician tasks can be considered dirty tasks. More specifically, entering the digital age implies huge amounts of unstructured data from different sources, and management accountants' involvement in ensuring the reliability of the data seems essential in order to make the data useful for managerial decision-making. Hence, entering the digital age brings the danger that management accountants get locked into dirty work. However, Cavélius et

al. (2020) do not relate the suggested role changes to identity, and the implications for the individual management accountant remain uninvestigated.

While Cavélius et al. (2020) argue for either a business partner role or a technician role, Rautiainen et al. (2024) suggest a fluid role of management accountants in the digital era, ranging from routine tasks and managing historical data to communicating forward-looking information to decision-makers. The study indicates that management accountants encompass several roles simultaneously, and the authors highlight the importance of management accountants switching between roles flexibly. Consequently, it appears that digitalization does not inherently ensure that management accountants have a business partner role (Cavélius et al., 2020; Rautiainen et al., 2024). Additionally, Rautiainen et al. (2024) bring the identity perspective into the discussion by presenting a fluid identity derived from earlier role scripts but with influences from future role expectations. Hence, Rautiainen et al. (2024) provide some indications of how the identity of management accountants at a Finnish bank is affected by the digitalized role of management accountants. However, their findings are industry specific and further investigations into management accountants' identity within other industries are needed to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

Congruent with Nach's (2015) findings about IT resistance, Firk et al. (2024) suggest digital anxiety as a potential hindrance to digital transformation, where employees who participate in digital training sessions and who are surrounded by digitally engaged colleagues and leaders indicate less anxiety. Hence, resistance might be the outcome if employee emotions are not considered when designing the IT system (Firk et al., 2024). Firk et al. (2024) discuss that the emotions and experiences of the individual need to be taken into consideration to maximize the benefits of digitalization. This further illustrates the urgent need for studies on the relationship between technology and the individual management accountant.

### 2.2.3. Artificial intelligence

Parks (2024) highlights the need for management accountants to adapt their skill sets to remain competitive along with evolving technology. Particularly, the author addresses AI and its potential impact on the role of management accountants. As AI evolves, the potential to replace human intelligence arises, and many professions might be impacted, including management accountants (Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2017; Parks, 2024). Similarly, Sundström (2024) describes how the development of AI can affect the forms, practices, and infrastructures of management accountants. While some are interested in Q&A chatbots, others pay attention to how AI models can conduct analyses on datasets, act as discussion partners or write Excel formulas (Sundström, 2024). Furthermore, Moll & Yigitbasioglu (2019) indicate that use of different analytical tools, including AI, can

automate companies' decision-making processes and transform the tasks performed by accountants daily.

However, AI does not solely offer opportunities for the role of management accountants but also risks. The ongoing advancements of AI and the expanding capacity to analyze Big Data have heightened the risk that a wide range of jobs will become computerized in the future, including management accountants (Frey & Osborne, 2017). Frey & Osborne (2017) suggest that more complex tasks currently carried out by accountants, like external reporting and business analysis, could be automated. The risk of replacement is attributed to the repetitive nature of these tasks and the absence of uniquely human skills (Frey & Osborne, 2017). Hence, from the perspective of Frey & Osborne (2017), the business partner versus bean-counter discussion might become irrelevant since they expect the role to be replaced by AI, regardless of the tasks they perform. Moll & Yigitbasioglu (2019) add nuance to Frey & Osborne (2017), suggesting that rather than replacing the role, new tasks can potentially arise from evolving technology. For example, they suggest managing and selecting relevant data to train AI applications as a potential task. Andersson & Andersson (2011) further describe management accountants as well-placed to validate, uphold, and ethically evaluate the quality of datasets used to train AI solutions. This suggested role transition of the management accountants aligns with Morales & Lambert's (2013) view; the number of dirty tasks may increase due to technological development. Limited research on the relationship between AI and the role of management accountants has been conducted, and the existing literature presents mixed views, which indicate the need for further investigation. Foremost, what AI means for the individual management accountant has not yet been explored. One potential risk stemming from the expectations of automation is that management accountants may feel hesitant about embracing evolving technology. Hence, more research is necessary to understand how those expectations of the role affect the management accountants themselves.

#### 2.2.4. The evolving technology

As section 2.2 illustrates, there are constantly new evolvments of technologies (Carlsson-Wall et al., 2022; Carlsson-Wall & Strömsten, 2018; Heinzlmann, 2018; Moll & Yigitbasioglu, 2019; Porter & Heppelmann, 2014; Sundström, 2024). It is Excel, ERP system, Big Data, and AI, and as presented, all of them have the potential to reshape the role of management accountants. Additionally, a common denominator of the presented technologies is the suggested automation and efficiency improvements of management accountants' tasks (Moll & Yigitbasioglu, 2019; Sundström, 2024). However, according to Goretzki & Pfister (2023) there are not only positive aspects of efficiency and productivity, and the intuitive nature of productivity can be misleading. As management accountants develop systems based on productivity ideals, they realize they can oversimplify their work. This realization undermines their sense of identity as business

partners, leaving them grappling with an unwanted self-image shaped by these measures (Goretzki & Pfister, 2023).

Reviewing research from the past decades reveals that evolving technologies are impacting management accountants in various ways beyond just enhancing productivity and efficiency. For instance, new tasks, heightened expectations, and a shifting role ambiguity arise from the introduction of new technology (Cavélius et al., 2020; Moll & Yigitbasioglu, 2019; Morales & Lambert, 2013). Overall, management accountants find themselves in situations where they need to make sense of new technologies, what it means to them, and how it affects them, regardless of the specific technology. Previous studies primarily focus on a specific technology rather than technology in general. What they all have in common is the potential to influence management accountants in terms of new expectations and demands. This highlights the significant relevance of studying how evolving technology as a concept influences management accountants.

### 2.3. Conceptualizing the relationship between digitalization discourse, role and identity of management accountants

The discussions about the constantly evolving technology demonstrate an existing digitalization discourse (Andreassen, 2020; Cavélius et al., 2020; Firk et al., 2024; Frey & Osborne, 2017; Moll & Yigitbasioglu, 2019; Sundström, 2024). The discourse is tangible not only within the academic discussion but also in practice among consultants (Deloitte, 2020; Parks, 2024). The discursive discussions about evolving technology encompass promises and expectations that create demand on management accountants to adapt and evolve in their roles. The expected role development towards becoming a business partner, aided by technological tools, potentially subjects the individual management accountant to pressures to engage and to fulfill the aspiration of the role. Subsequently, the pressure from the digitalization discourse implies uncertainties: how to behave, how to develop, and how to be more efficient. Heinzelmann (2018) shows how IT serves as a regulatory tool to influence the desired behavior of management accountants, but the discursive perspective is yet disregarded in the literature. Goretzki et al. (2013) show how institutional work and organizational actors can affect the internalization of a new role, thereby affecting the identities of management accountants. What is missing is how management accountants internalize the ongoing digitalization discourse into their role and identity through their identity work. Therefore, to the authors' best knowledge, the existing literature lacks an examination of the impact of the digitalization discourse on the identity of management accountants.

The individual management accountant needs to internalize the new role expectations into their identity and understand what it means to them (Goretzki et al., 2013). Congruent with Goretzki et al. (2013), Andreassen (2020) and Järventie-Thesleff & Tienari (2016) refer to the roles of management accountants as mediators in their identity work.

Management accountants' identity is shaped by the elusive nature of their role, leading to identity work, which is activated when they fail to meet their aspirational role (Heinzelmann 2018; Morales & Lambert, 2013). Through identity work, people reproduce and transform their self-identity to create a sense of coherence and distinctiveness (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). The uncertainty surrounding the role of management accountants necessitates a deeper exploration of the impact IT has on individual management accountants. In particular, it is interesting to explore how they adjust their identities in response to these evolving circumstances. Previous research indicates that IT, roles, and identity are interconnected concepts and that IT may act as an identity change driver for management accountants (Heinzelmann, 2018; Nach, 2015). Goretzki & Messner (2019) indicate that identity is embedded in broader organizational values, further indicating the urgent need for our study about the relationship between digitalization discourse, role, and identity.

Our study aims to empirically investigate how the digitalization discourse affects the individual management accountant and how the individual management accountant experiences, reacts to and handles the different concerns and expectations that are placed on the role. This study seeks to address the following research question:

Research Question: How do management accountants construct themselves in the light of evolving technology?

## 2.4. Theoretical framework

In our study of management accountants' identity construction in the light of evolving technology, we take inspiration from the Watson (2008) framework to understand the relationship between digitalization discourse and self-identity (See Figure 1). As indicated in the previous section, management accountants' identity is influenced by technological advancements. Watson (2008) offers a suitable approach to cover embedded values, expectations, concerns, and pressures occurring within the digitalization discourse that potentially impact the management accountants' construct of themselves. By employing the framework, we can better comprehend how evolving technology shapes the identities of management accountants. This theoretical lens allows for examining the interplay between the organizational digitalization discourse, the role script of management accountants, and the self-identity of management accountants. According to Watson (2008), the organizational setting provides ideal contexts for employing sociological imagination and investigating how individuals navigate questions of identity and future aspirations. Within organizations, individuals are expected to adopt distinct corporate identities. These identities must be flexible and adaptable to evolving global, societal, and organizational dynamics. By understanding the relationship between digitalization discourse, the role script of management accountants, and self-identity, the aim is to understand the management accountants' construction of themselves in the light

of evolving technology. Additionally, we aim to learn how management accountants make sense of technology and how their use of technology relates to their identities.

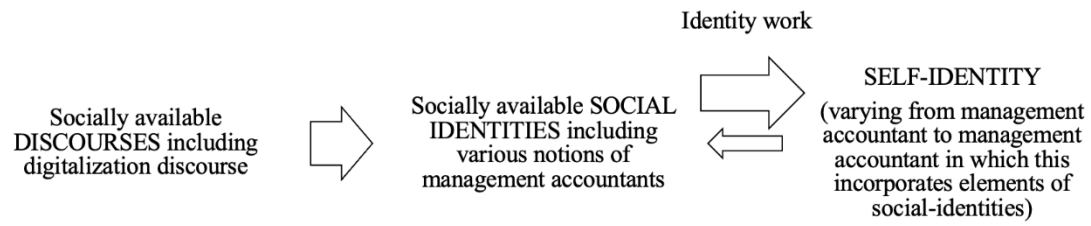
As presented, Watson's framework is adopted with the purpose to understand the relationship between discourse and self-identity. Additionally, we reshape Watson's (2008) concepts according to the context of our study. Moreover, we bring the ideas and definitions from Alvesson & Willmott (2002) and Giddens (1991) into the framework by Watson (2008). As stated by Giddens (1991), "Self-identity is not a distinctive trait, or even a collection of traits, possessed by the individual. It is the self as reflexively understood by the person . . . self-identity is continuity (across time and space) as interpreted reflexively by the agent" (Giddens, 1991, p. 53). Accordingly, self-identity is a product assembled out of values, symbols, language, and meanings gathered from various interactions, exposure to messages produced by agencies, such as mass media or schools, and previous life experiences. Putting all these together, the result is a complex mix of conscious and unconscious components, forming an interpretive framework that evolves over time through identity work and identity construction processes. In this study, self-identity is defined as the management accountants' occupational self-identity, i.e. their identity in a professional context.

Watson (2008) and Giddens (1991) indicate that individuals face many diverse, competing, and contradictory pressures that they have to make sense of. These pressures are not only about what they are going to do but also who they are in different situations and therefore have to engage in identity work. Alvesson & Willmott (2002) explain how self-identity is sustained, reworked, and induced through identity work. Identity work refers to the conscious or unconscious effort individuals put into shaping, maintaining, and negotiating their own sense of identity. Alvesson & Willmott (2002) present identity work as partially unselfconscious, nevertheless contingent on life history and the dominant narratives that shape how identity is perceived. Most human activity involves active identity construction, and people are consistently participating in processes to form, maintain, strengthen, repair, or revise the frameworks that contribute to a sense of coherence and uniqueness. Conscious identity work originates both from self-doubt and self-openness, commonly contingent on existential worry and skepticism or inconsistencies faced in interactions with others or individuals' images of others. Watson (2008) explains how identity work comprises both internal self-reflection and external engagement which take place through action and talk with various discursive social identities. Furthermore, Alvesson & Willmott (2002) describe the basis for identity work as the management of, on the one hand, emotional activation and, on the other hand, the discourse of socially established norms. Essentially, identity work is the ongoing process of self-definition and self-expression in response to internal and external influences. By employing Alvesson & Willmott's (2002) concept of identity work in our study, we seek to understand how management accountants make choices within the meanings and situations offered in the organizational context. Subsequently, we aim to understand how

they engage in identity work to sustain, rework, and induce their self-identity.

Watson (2008) develops the concept of identity work by distinguishing between personal self-identities and discursive social identities. Self-identities can be seen as an internal perspective, while social identities can be seen as an external perspective of identity. Several social identities can appear within the same discourse, however, in our analysis, we limit the definition of social identity to the formal-role social identity (Watson, 2008). More specifically, we refer to social identity as the role script of management accountants. Embedded in the role script of management accountants, there are external factors such as opinions and norms by scholars, consultants, and management that explain how the role of management accountants should be. Certain of these external factors can be internalized in the identity work when individuals define “this is what I want to be like” (Watson, 2009). Recognizing management accountants’ role script is necessary to understand the relationship between discourses and self-identity, as illustrated by Watson’s framework (2008). Andreassen (2020), Goretzki et al. (2013), and Järventie-Thesleff & Tienari (2016) indicate that changes contributed to the roles of management accountants can act as mediators in the identity work of management accountants, which further illustrates the necessity to understand the role to achieve an understanding of the identity.

Previous research presents evolving technology as a phenomenon affecting management accountants’ role and identity. Management accountants are not isolated actors: their decisions and actions are influenced by the social environment in which they operate. According to Watson (2008), they are influenced by discourse, as they are situated within the wider social and organizational context, encompassing prevailing societal and organizational beliefs, norms, and values. Accordingly, a discursive perspective appears suitable for our analysis to understand how evolving technology affects management accountants. The model describes the connection between the discourses and social identity, as well as the individuals and how processes shape the identities on different levels. In the framework, a small arrow indicates that individuals also make inputs into social identities by interpreting and modifying the role in social identity. The framework will guide us through the analysis of the gathered data. Applying the framework will make it easier to categorize the causal relationships between discourse, what affects the role of management accountants, and how management accountants construct their identity in relation to those changes.



*Figure 1: Watson's (2008) theoretical framework applied in a Management Accounting and Digitalization Context, illustrating the relationship between discourse, social identities, and self-identity.*

*Source: Watson (2008)*

### **3. Method**

The following section provides an overview of the case company and the research design and methodology utilized to address our research question. Initially, a description of the case company's key characteristics and organizational structure are outlined. The subsequent sections encompass the research design employed, the approach to data collection and data analysis, considerations regarding data quality, and delimitations.

#### **3.1. Case company**

NewsCo is a European corporation and a major player in the media industry, focusing on newspapers. Due to their industry affiliation, NewsCo is currently undergoing a digital transformation of its entire business, from paper magazines with mainly advertising revenue to applications with mainly subscription revenues.

Digitalization affects the company in many aspects. About 20 years ago, all the revenue came from printed newspapers, mostly from advertising in the newspapers. Today, NewsCo's main revenue source is subscriptions, and just a small share is advertising revenue. Today's newspaper production is distributed fifty-fifty between digital and print newspapers, and a continued decline in print is expected. Except for the shift towards digital internet revenue, the business transformation also affects the operations, including sales processes, changed distribution channels, and changed structure of the support functions such as finance. Neither printing presses nor employees working with newspaper deliveries are needed to the same extent and, instead, websites and applications constitute the distribution channels. Furthermore, NewsCo has a strategy of acquiring companies and has grown through acquisitions. During the past five years, the turnover in NewsCo has doubled due to acquisitions rather than organic growth.

NewsCo is organized into a matrix organization, see Appendix F. The company consists of six business areas, and the finance department extends through all business areas. The finance department consists of Financial Control, Business Control, Corporate Development, Procurement and Facilities, Security, Data Protection, and Legal, see Appendix G. Within the Business Control function, there are Lead Business controllers responsible for each business area but also areas such as Sales, Reader revenues, Tech, and HR & Projects, that span over all the business areas. Each Lead Business controller is responsible for a team consisting of one or more business controllers. Within Financial control, there are several financial controllers responsible for the different legal entities. The finance function works continuously to harmonize reporting and accounting, so it is performed in the same way throughout the organization and all the legal entities.

### 3.2. Research design

This study has been conducted using a qualitative single case study methodology to achieve the purpose of the essay, to understand management Accountants' self-identities in the light of evolving technology. A qualitative and interpretive approach seems suitable for this study since the aim is to gain an understanding of a real-life phenomenon, rather than measuring it (Bryman & Bell, 2015; Ridder, 2017). The selected approach enables an in-depth analysis of how management accountants within NewsCo construct their identity in the context of evolving technology. Compared to a multi-case study, a single case study was considered more relevant since it provides better opportunities to gain an understanding of "how" and "why" a phenomenon works in a specific way. As argued by Ridder (2017), a single case study enables a deeper understanding of the phenomenon, which can lead to the identification of relationships and patterns in a more comprehensive manner.

The design of the case selection process was inspired by Siggelkow (2007), arguing that the choice of a company is not always random but rather deliberate. Moreover, he explains that this deliberate choice is driven by its unique opportunities to gain insights that might be exclusively available within this company. Our deliberately chosen company, NewsCo, allowed us to dig deep into the intricacies of the organization in terms of the digital transformation they are currently undergoing.

### 3.3. Data collection

To answer the research question in the most suitable way, data was mainly gathered through qualitative interviews with management accountants. The qualitative approach was appropriate in order to gather comprehensive insights into the self-identities of the management accountants within NewsCo. The Institute of Management Accountants (2008) defines management accounting as follows: "[...] involves partnering in management decision making, devising planning and performance management systems, and providing expertise in financial reporting and control to assist management in the formulation and implementation of an organization's strategy". A management accountant can be considered as the task carrier of management accounting practices. There are country-specific differences in management accounting concepts and the title in some European countries, including Sweden, is labeled as a business or financial controller (Ahrens & Chapman, 2000). In this study, management accountants are defined as those working within the finance function at NewsCo, either within Business Control (BC) or Financial Control (FC).

The sample approach was primarily purposive, aiming to collect data about the management accountants' work tasks, attitudes, perceptions, expectations, and feelings about their role in the context of digital transformation. During the last step of the data

collection process, we obtained access to additional interviewees through snowball sampling to validate the findings and thereby increase the data quality.

Between the 26<sup>th</sup> of February and the 14<sup>th</sup> of March 2024, 24 interviews were conducted with employees at NewsCo, see Appendix A. Most of the interviews were conducted online via Google Meets and Teams for accessibility reasons. Five interviews were conducted physically at NewsCo's headquarters, which enabled us to observe contextual factors, body language, and other non-verbal information. The average length of the interviews was 55 minutes and recorded with the permission of the interviewee. Both researchers were present: one interview leader and one note-taker. All interviews were transcribed, and the empirical material includes both notes and transcriptions.

As visualized in Appendix A, we interviewed 17 management accountants, the CFO, two Strategy and M&A employees, the Head of Procurement, and three IT employees, one of whom focuses on business development. All interviewees belong to the finance department except for two of the IT employees. We interviewed management accountants from two different hierarchical levels. All interviewed management accountants are involved in controlling activities, but Lead Business Controllers and Head of Financial Control are included in management teams and have some degree of personnel responsibility for business controllers and financial controllers within their teams. The interviews with non-management accountants served the purpose of gaining an understanding of the environmental context and the digital transformation on a discursive level. Moreover, the interviews with the IT employees outside the finance department contributed to insights unbiased by internal influences within the finance department.

A semi-structured interview format allowed exploration and fostered a responsive and reflective atmosphere (Bryman & Bell, 2015). As Rowley (2012) further argues, a semi-structured format allows the researchers to be more flexible in response to the interviewee's answers, elaborate on themes, and ask relevant follow-up questions. Hence, the direct engagement with the management accountants from NewsCo enabled the researchers to uncover underlying aspects that construct their self-identity that otherwise may not have been anticipated (Bryman & Bell, 2015; Rowley, 2012).

Semi-structured interview guides were conducted well in advance and consisted of open-ended questions to the interviewees. The interview guides were developed for the purpose to capture the management accountants', i.e., the main target group's, work tasks, attitudes, perceptions, expectations, and feelings about their role in the context of digital transformation. The predefined interview guides were tailored to the specific profession of the interviewee: one for the management accountants, one for the CFO, the Head of procurement and Strategy and M&A employees, and one for the IT employees. The main difference between the guides was a stronger individual focus for the management accountants and a more discursive focus for the others. Additionally, the interview guide

for the management accountants was structured slightly differently compared to others to mitigate the risk of impression management. By asking similar questions multiple times but phrasing them differently and extensively utilizing follow-up questions, we aimed to uncover underlying insights and perspectives. Moreover, the guide for the IT employees was limited to IT-related questions. Appendices B, C, and D provide condensed examples of interview guides.

A second source of empirical material was two observations of meetings: 1) The finance department's monthly meeting (duration: 1,5 hours) and 2) The Lead management accountants' weekly meeting (duration: 45 minutes). The observations served two different purposes. Firstly, to obtain a deeper understanding of the organization on a discursive level by listening to the ongoing discussions. Secondly, it brings insights into how management accountants present themselves to others and how they integrate with others. Additionally, company documents, such as organizational charts and PowerPoint presentations, are included in the empirics.

### 3.4. Data analysis

The analysis of the data has been characterized by an iterative process. Immediately after the interview was finished, the main findings and possible implications for the question guide and future interviews were discussed. The iterative approach revealed interesting new findings and focus areas that are the basis of a deep analysis and discussion, which later culminated in a conclusion that depicts how management accountants construct themselves in the light of the evolving technology.

The analysis of the gathered data was conducted through coding. The processing of the data began with both researchers independently analyzing the transcripts and categorizing data with color coding based on concepts and themes from the theoretical framework that were of interest based on the purpose of the study. In a Word document, the data was then categorized and compiled into the respective concepts and themes. The interviews were conducted in Swedish, and therefore, the data was translated into English at this stage, with the aim to sustain the original expression of the interview as closely as possible. The central themes of the study are shown in Appendix E. The approach employed is, according to Bryman & Bell (2015), called open coding. Subsequently, a discussion of connections and differences in the identified themes was initiated, which is similar to axial coding (Bryman & Bell, 2015). The above concepts and themes were put into context, and based on it, the connections between the different categories were analyzed. To conduct the analysis, the collected empirical data were analyzed with lenses from the theoretical framework, relevant literature, and the themes identified in the data processing. In order to arrive at a conclusion, a form of selective coding was made (Bryman & Bell, 2015). In the last step of the data analysis, central relationships and

explanations for the phenomena have been tried to be found to provide a better understanding of the subject.

The search for a relevant theoretical framework was done in parallel with the data collection process. The theoretical framework by Watson (2008) was decided based on the emerging insights from the interviews. After first analyzing how management accountants perceive themselves and how that relates to technology, our collected data highlighted a persuasive influence of organizational discourses, which we wanted to delve into more deeply. Hence, Watson's framework was appropriate for investigating the discursive effects on management accountants' identity and how they construct themselves in their occupational roles. As insights originated from both empirical findings and theory, it is evident that the study uses an abductive approach. As Dubois & Gadde (2002) described, this methodology adopts a dynamic approach in which the researcher continuously alternatives different research activities, navigating between empirical observations and theoretical constructs. This iterative process facilitated a deeper understanding of both theory and empirical phenomena.

### 3.5. Data quality

Further conscious choices made with the aim of increasing the quality of the work are presented below. Trustworthiness and authenticity are foundational principles in qualitative research (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Trustworthiness involves the data's dependability, transferability, credibility, and confirmability. According to Bryman & Bell (2015), lacking transparency is a criticism of qualitative research. They believe this type of research needs more information about how the research was conducted and how the researchers arrived at conclusions. Hence, we have strived for a well-described research process that helps the reader understand the conscious choices made.

Bryman & Bell (2015) explain that dependability is achieved by providing a complete and accessible account of all phases in the research process. By having detailed descriptions of data collection, selection of respondents, conduction of interviews, and data analysis in the method section, dependability is ensured.

To enhance the transferability, we thoroughly described the case company. Furthermore, we presented as much empirical background as possible to ensure a comprehensive description of the case narrative. To fully present the data and ensure all respondents' views were included, we provided a claim table with various claims mapped with supporting quotes (Rockman & Vough, 2023). We carefully considered the source of the quotes, including position in the organization and the type of quotes to ensure the trustworthiness of the data. After having conducted the claim table, the relationships between the claims were identified and a storyboard was made. Storyboarding helped the focus on the entirety of the findings and was a visual way to link diverse claims. In line

with Rockman & Vough (2023), the benefits of providing a storyboard were that it was helpful in ensuring that the same data was not repeated in different sections and that multiple voices were presented, enabling a full depiction of the case.

Credibility has been established by letting the respondents review quotes and the findings before including them in the paper. Moreover, our understanding of a specific statement has been validated by having several interviewees confirm the statement and by observing two meetings to validate statements further.

The researchers acknowledge the subjectivity of qualitative studies and the fact that a large part of the research is based on the researchers' own perceptions (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Accordingly, achieving confirmability might not be possible in this study. However, in order to reduce the impact of the researchers' personal values on the findings, distinct interpretations from previous research have been used to define concepts and areas handled in this study. Moreover, to ensure that multiple perspectives were captured during the interviews, both authors participated in all interviews and asked follow-up questions. Both authors independently analyzed the transcriptions before we started structuring the data in the themes. This method enabled interpretations from several perspectives to be captured from the data.

In order to increase the authenticity and quality of work, the management accountant's identity has been studied from different perspectives. The respondents expressed both positive and negative effects of digitalization, and in the empirics, all aspects that the respondents expressed have been included. Moreover, also in the literature review, it was sought to highlight diverse perspectives on the area. Hence, by incorporating a range of perspectives the authenticity of our study was maintained.

### 3.6. Research ethics

The research has been done in accordance with ethical considerations and regulatory requirements. Ethical considerations and regulatory requirements refer to ensuring the quality of the work and simultaneously considering the integrity of the participants. The participants were informed about the aim of the research and that their involvement in the study was voluntary. Furthermore, the participants also consented to the interviews being recorded. To ensure integrity for both the interviews and the case company, personal data like gender and name have been replaced with anonymized identifiers.

## 4. Empirical analysis

In this chapter, the data collected through the interviews is presented and analyzed. With help from the empirical findings, the research questions will be investigated. The starting point for the analysis is Watson's (2008) framework by which we analyze the empirical data to develop new perspectives and findings. The empirical analysis starts with a description of the ongoing digitalization discourse. Subsequently, the social identities of the management accountants are presented. Finally, self-identity is defined with insights from digitalization discourse and the role script. Moreover, in the section about self-identity, management accountants' identity work is illustrated. For further empirical material, see quotes in Appendix H. The quotes appendix does not contribute with new insights but rather confirms the ones included in the empirical analysis.

### 4.1. The digitalization discourse

As illustrated in the reviewed literature, digital development has the potential to impact the role and identity of management accountants. Digital development shapes and influences organizational discourses and by understanding the digitalization discourse within NewsCo, we seek to investigate the discursive implications on management accountants' self-identity. To understand how management accountants at NewsCo shape their identity, the social setting, and the organizational dynamics within NewsCo need to be understood.

#### 4.1.1. The ongoing business transformation within the newspaper industry

It is evident that NewsCo is undergoing a digital transformation of its business. The nature of the case company's business requires this digital transformation of the entire business, from print to digital, as outlined in the case company description. The collected data shows that the digital transformation is tangible also from the management accountants' perspective, as the following quotes confirm:

“[...] our product was newspapers, now you read the news on the phone.” (FC 5)

“[...] digital ads and digital subscriptions have been added. [...] It grows and gets bigger and bigger while the printed ones go down, and it's a huge change for our business. And it continues all the time.” (BC 9)

The quotes present the management accountants' interpretations of the ongoing digitalization discourse within NewsCo. FC 7 further explains his/her interpretation of the discourse:

”So my point of view is that it [digitalization] is positive [...] but I also think, we're fed with it all the time from all departments as well. How much more efficient and better and better quality [digitalization will lead to].” (FC 7)

The way the management accountant describes their view of digitalization indicates that there are embedded narratives within the discourse, fostering a positive view. The quote from FC 7 explicitly reflects a perception of digitalization as a positive force, suggesting potential benefits in terms of efficiency and quality improvement. However, implicitly, it also highlights a sense of being inundated or overwhelmed by constant messages promoting digitalization. This indicates a disciplinary aspect within the digitalization discourse that serves to shape the behaviors, attitudes, and practices of management accountants, potentially influencing their identity.

#### 4.1.2. Standardization and acquisition strategies

NewsCo strives to standardize its systems and processes throughout the entire organization. This also applies to the finance function and the management accountants since they work with the financial parts of the standardization efforts, such as integrating financial statements from different companies into one system. The standardization of systems presents an essential part of the digitalization discourse since it acts as a catalyst for digitalization. By creating a cohesive environment that supports integration, efficiency, scalability, and consistency of digital technologies within NewsCo, the organization can unlock the full potential of digitalization. Today, the financial data in NewsCo is located in many different data sources and not unified into one data lake. As Tech 1 describes, standardization and harmonization are necessary for NewsCo to be able to implement AI tools, which is part of its tech strategy. The CFO presents their ambition towards standardization and harmonization in the following way:

“We've been working quite a lot on getting basic platforms together, like getting all our subscribers into the same subscription platform. We're not yet done with that. That's something we're going to achieve. We're going to get all our journalists into the same working tool, where they write their articles and publish their articles. [...] That is a hygiene factor. [...]” (CFO)

The expression of standardization as a hygiene factor indicates that it cannot be evaded, implicitly forcing employees to be involved in the standardization work. NewsCo's strategic focus on standardizing systems significantly impacts the finance function, requiring a unified chart of accountants and transaction recording structure across all the companies within the group. The standardization efforts demand resources and coordination to align diverse systems and practices, tasks expected to be managed by the management accountants. NewsCo's decision to hire a BI developer exclusively for the finance function further illuminates the finance function's significant role in the standardization work, thus making the digitalization discourse even more tangible within the finance function. The standardization affects the management accountants in their day-to-day work. As illustrated by the following quotes, they work with the financial parts of different integration projects; the financial controller works towards one harmonized reporting entity for distribution, and the business controller towards one unified BI tool:

“We have three separate distribution companies today. During the spring, we're going to merge and create a new joint company, so it's a project that I'm involved in. We will carry out a business transfer and a merger, so what impact does that have on us here and what do we need to consider in this project? I'm involved in the financial part of this project.” (FC 3)

“[...] We're currently working on getting them [a subsidiary] into the BI tool in a smoother way than we have before. It's more like syncing it with NewsCo's new structure. That's what I'm working on right now, I've helped [a subsidiary] and get that mapping into the BI tool so that we don't have to go through another system that we have had before. Since February, we can look at it [the financial data] in the same way as we do with the other parts.” (BC 5)

Standardization, including integration and harmonizing initiatives, fosters an environment promoting technological innovation. This reflects the broader societal discourse within NewsCo that promotes technological advancement and adoption. Integrating NewsCo's subsidiaries and their different systems into one single system accelerates the demand for innovative and modern solutions, driving technological development in NewsCo. The demand for, and work towards modern technology, strengthens the digitalization discourse within the company, and within the discourse there is a clear ideal about standardization and efficiency.

One factor driving the standardization efforts is NewsCo's mergers and acquisition strategy. As new companies are acquired, NewsCo must integrate the acquisitions and harmonize the systems in order to gain cost synergies, hence the acquisitions create pressure on standardization:

“It [NewsCo] has grown very quickly, and it puts a lot of demands on boring parts such as the data management, infrastructure, and all the databases that we have to build.” (Tech 1)

Furthermore, Tech 1 describes how harmonization can increase the finance function's efficiency and automation. This implies expectations on the finance function, management accountants included both to be more efficient and to replace the tasks that become automated with new tasks to remain relevant for NewsCo. Moreover, harmonized data can contribute to better business analysis. Tech 1 describes how management accountants will be expected to conduct analyzes that stretches beyond financial figures, and also include other types of information such as behavior data. This indicates that the ongoing digitalization discourse within NewsCo creates expectations on the management accountants to act in a certain way.

In addition to the acquisitions putting pressure on standardization, some of the acquisitions themselves have a direct impact on NewsCo's technological development. One such example is NewsCo's acquisition of a digital reading platform, as exemplified

by Strategy and M&A 1. In particular, it illustrates how the acquisition strategy drives technological development, illuminating the digitalization discourse within NewsCo.

#### 4.1.3. AI initiatives

AI is a particularly relevant topic within the discussion about evolving technology, as presented in the literature review. This is also the case in NewsCo where AI is referred to as an essential part of their strategy:

“We have a strategy session every spring where we update the entire group strategy and update each business area strategy, and there the technology strategy is an integrated part, I would say, and specifically regarding AI, we are driving it right now, like an AI forum.” (CFO)

AI is not only a part of the company’s strategic focus going forward, but already an integral part within the editorial team and some of the company support functions. The CFO exemplifies several functions’ use of AI bots including Human Resource, Customer Service and IT support. The strong AI focus in NewsCo is recognized by the management accountants as well, and the following quotes present their perceptions about AI in terms of opportunities and challenges:

“It [AI] will put a completely different pressure on journalism as well. [...] There will be easier ways to access the same information, but there will also be more insecure information out there.” (BC 10)

“There are a lot of possibilities with AI and AI can generate articles [...]. At the same time, the articles' feel and quality can disappear if AI-driven. There will be a trade-off where you do not want to lose the customers' willingness to read newspapers.” (FC 6)

The core of the business in NewsCo is journalism, and AI will probably affect journalism. Although management accounting does not work directly with journalism, the general perception of AI at NewsCo appears reflected in the management accountants’ perceptions. The quotes from BC 10 and FC 6 illustrate that management accountants do not solely contemplate the aspects of AI that will impact their own profession, but rather, discussions about AI circulate continuously in various forms. This could potentially contribute to a sense that one must engage in AI discussions to feel a sense of belonging. From a discursive point of view, the ideas within the AI discourse are inscribed into the management accountants’ perceptions.

The CFO brings the AI discussions into a finance context:

“We've had some pilot discussions [within finance] about this very popular generative AI. We have discussed a Q/A bot that can answer things like how one should book this invoice? Also to use AI for checking all reconciliations, that the

right items are on the balance sheets and that there's nothing to worry about, that everything looks OK. Well, obviously, it's analytical, and someone needs to think about it, but it's not super difficult. I mean things that don't require investigation. Things like that, I think could be automated much more.” (CFO)

The AI initiatives within is further reflected in a management accountant’s perception:

“There are constant discussions about digitalization and AI. It's almost every meeting; it's like, what can we do with AI? These projects are ongoing, how can we incorporate them into everyday life in all departments and such, so that is constantly relevant, and many are passionate and driving these issues I feel that there is an openness to technology.” (BC 2)

The management accountant’s perception of ongoing discussions about digitalization and AI highlights the significance of these topics within the social discourse. This suggests that digitalization and AI have become focal points of conversation, reflecting broader societal trends emphasizing the importance of technological innovation and adaptation within NewsCo. The quote further highlights the ongoing projects that incorporate digitalization and AI into daily operations across departments, indicating an embedded belief within the discourse that technology should be seamlessly integrated into organizational processes to enhance efficiency and effectiveness. Additionally, the mention of passion and drive among many individuals suggests a shared belief in the transformative potential of technology, further reinforcing its importance within the organizational discourse. The perceived strong focus on AI in the internal meetings is further confirmed by the researchers’ observations of two different meetings: the monthly Finance meeting and the weekly Financial Control/ Business Control meeting. A main topic discussed during those meetings was the upcoming Finance AI bot. More specifically, the discussions circulated around the bot’s functions, what information should be included and excluded in the bot, who should have access to the bot, and how management accountants can contribute to the development of the bot.

Moreover, the CFO’s interpretations of AI are reflected in the management accountant’s perceptions, as BC 2’s quote exemplifies. In the role as the management accountant’s manager, the CFO acts as a steward in transferring the AI discourse to the management accountant through his/her communication. The same applies to Tech 1, whose view on AI also might affect the management accountants’ perception, both the positive and the challenging views, through his/her AI presentations for the finance function. Thereby, managerial implications regarding the management accountants’ interpretations of AI and digitalization are noticed.

In this section, the digitalization discourse within NewsCo is presented; there are clear ideals within this social discourse including standardization, efficiency, automation and urgency, that the management accountants refer to when they talk about technology.

The following sections will provide a detailed overview of the implications of the digitalization discourse on the role scripts of management accountants and subsequently the self-identity of the individual management accountant.

#### 4.2. Management accountants' social identities

As Watson (2008) describes, role can be considered as the external perspective of the management accountant. It is the cultural, discursive, or institutional notion of who or what the management accountant might be. The roles, or as Watson (2008) defines them, social identities, play a central role within the discourses and individuals' reference to them in their own identity work. In this section, the social identity of management accountants at NewsCo is first presented from an external perspective through the voices of management. Secondly, role descriptions are presented by the management accountants themselves, confirming the management's view. Lastly, we illustrate the digitalization discourse's implications on the management accountants' social identity. The purpose of the initial explanation of the management accountants' general role script is to enable a deeper understanding of the digitalization discourse's implications on their identity work and self-identity, which will be investigated in later sections.

##### 4.2.1. The role script of management accountants at NewsCo

The CFO describes the role of a good management accountant as very present, both financial controller and business controller included. He/she further explains their responsibility for the financial strategic plan: to develop and translate it into activities, and hence, all management accountants at NewsCo have financial responsibility in common. Both FC and BC are number-oriented, they are involved in the monthly closing, and they collaborate in many areas. However, the CFO presents differences in how the social identities of a business controller and a financial controller are scripted:

“Financial controllers work with accounting. They make sure our financial statements are accurate and reconcile all the balance sheet accounts, that there aren't a lot of balances being built up [...]. Financial controllers are more isolated and work mostly within the finance function. [...] Financial controllers reconcile and control that everything is in order, that you don't suddenly realize that, now we have to make write-downs of 5 million because we have no control over this. But that doesn't happen if you are a really good financial controller. Then you have control and predictability in your legal entities.” (CFO)

“Business controllers, shouldn't work so much in the financial department, but they should work in the business. If you are a Lead business controller, you are in the management team for a business area and have the corresponding role of mine [CFO]. The role I have for NewsCo, they [Lead Business controllers] have for a business area or a function. It means being a strategic partner to the business area

manager. [...] That means you need to have a good grasp of what drives the business as well as tracking operating profit, what's important for us going forward, both in terms of revenue and costs. Like a trade-off between perhaps price increases and volume increases. If we are talking about subscription or ads and productivity on staff [...] you have the facts to be able to be a helpful strategic person in the management team.” (CFO)

The CFO assigns distinct responsibilities between FCs and BCs in the financial reporting: while FCs focus on the balance sheet, BCs concentrate on the income statement. Furthermore, the CFO describes that FCs tend to operate more isolated within the finance function, whereas BCs are more integrated into the operations. BCs strong integration with the operations aligns with its focus on the income statement and performance of the business areas. FCs, on the other hand, have their focus on the legal entities and compliance with accounting regulations. The distinct role scripts are also reflected in the management accountants’ presentations of their responsibilities:

“It's much more accounting within financial control [compared to business control]. Many more regulations, much more reliance on accounting standards. I felt that as a business controller, when you look at results and such, it's a bit more dynamic, but in the balance sheet, it's so clear, that's where everything you postpone or pay in advance is placed. I feel that it requires more precision.” (FC 7)

“My main tasks are, of course, to compile our monthly financial statements, gather results, and ensure that the profit is as accurate as possible for the month. Additionally, we continuously make forecasts, but we report forecasts twice a year. We also have a budget process during the fall when we set budgets for the upcoming year. Those are the major processes I'm involved in, but on an ongoing basis, it could involve anything from gathering data as decision support for something, analyzing something if it's going better or worse to find the reasons, and so on.” (BC 9)

Business controllers and financial controllers in NewsCo have very similar professional and educational backgrounds, they both play critical roles in managing the company's finances, and the roles may overlap to some extent. However, there are some company-specific distinctions between the two role scripts regarding their primary responsibilities and focus areas, as scripted by the CFO. Business controllers, on the one hand, are involved in strategic planning and performance management, while financial controllers are more focused on financial reporting, accounting, compliance, and internal controls. In the following section, the outlined social identities will be further developed in the context of the digitalization discourse within NewsCo.

#### 4.2.2. Discursive implications on management accountants’ role scripts

In addition to the role scripts presented in the previous section, further role characteristics can be identified, driven by the digitalization discourse in NewsCo. Firstly, management

accountants are expected to contribute to the standardization strategy by integrating subsidiaries into one common financial model in one common system. This applies to both FCs and BCs. The following quotes illustrate that new tasks arise because of the standardization focus:

“A crucial aspect right now is to reduce the number of legal entities, and within that project there's a significant effort to try to automate a large amount of data from our distribution system and to achieve good revenue analysis. This needs to be done. There's a lot of structured data and so on, so it's one of the most immediate goals I see as super important so that we don't get stuck in making the right decisions but can help the business make the right decisions at the right time.” (BC 7)

“A typical example is that we have several different subscription systems where all our subscribers are located, generating revenue for us. And now we're in the process of migrating a number of brands into the same subscription system. This system must, for example, be able to provide us with accurate revenue, invoices, credit notes, VAT transactions, and so on. Everything that affects the income statement, balance sheet, and tax matters. As stakeholders, we need to work with the tech team and explain that if we sell this type of product to a customer abroad, then the system must be able to create an invoice that looks like this with this type of VAT. Those kinds of questions. So, we specify what the system needs to be able to do to comply with accounting rules and VAT and tax regulations.” (FC 1)

Consequently, the digitalization discourse influences how the role of all management accountants at NewsCo is scripted. However, the explanations provided by BC 7 and FC 1 suggest that the influences from the discourse take different forms depending on their role scripts. While BC 7 emphasizes the importance of making real-time business decisions through automation, FC 1 focuses on ensuring the accuracy of the numbers in the systems.

Moreover, NewsCo seeks to gain economies of scale and to do so standardization and increased efficiency are essential. The more standardized processes they have, the better opportunities to automate the processes and, thereby, increase efficiency. Hence, the concept of automation is strongly connected to the standardization strategy. The following quotes further illustrate how the management accountants translate the ideas of automation and efficiency, embedded in the digitalization discourse, into their work:

“I work a lot on improving the systems and tools for everyone in business control and financial control. It's a lot about streamlining processes and enhancing efficiency.” (BC 8)

“We are working on trying to streamline things regarding follow-up. Often, we close the results, and then the business would like to have the results and comments and everything a second later, so we have worked a lot on that as well as finding

automation and efficiencies. Everything from building smart Excel models or connections between PowerPoint and Excel where you can just paste in, so tables are updated, [...].” (BC 1)

As outlined in 4.1.2, NewsCo’s mergers and acquisition strategy pressures standardization and the company’s technological development. This is also evident from the perspective of the management accountants’ social identity, as they are expected to engage in the integration of acquisitions in their systems. NewsCo focuses on harmonizing financial processes such as follow-up, reporting, and accounting for the management accountants, demonstrating the desire for consistency and standardization within the finance function. This reflects the role of management accountants as stewards of financial information and processes, ensuring accuracy, reliability, and efficiency in financial reporting and analysis. The following quote illustrates a management accountant’s constant strive toward efficiency:

“As we grow and acquire more companies, we’ve needed to organize the reader operations more based on the customer journey. Like how do we acquire subscribers? How do we ensure they stay, and what happens when they want to cancel their subscription? Also, things like customer service and finding scalable ways to work. [...]. We also need to think a bit about finance. How can we find scalable models and budgets? We’ve worked a lot on harmonizing follow-up, reporting, and accounting so that everyone does it the same way. [...].” (BC 1)

The mention of efforts to streamline follow-up processes and implement automation tools further underscores the role of management accountants as drivers of organizational efficiency and effectiveness. By leveraging technology and developing smart Excel models, management accountants can enhance their ability to deliver timely and insightful financial information to support decision-making across the organization. The quote highlights the evolving role of management accountants within the organization. Their role is adapted to ideals within the digitalization discourse while maintaining their role as guardians of financial integrity and accuracy.

Another catalyst for automation, and an essential part of NewsCo’s digitalization discourse, is AI, as outlined in previous sections. The AI discussions may influence the management accountants’ role since both FCs and BCs are expected to engage in AI initiatives. This was evident during observations of the monthly finance meeting where Tech 2 was attending to introduce the upcoming Finance bot. He/she strongly encouraged the management accountants to contribute to the further development of the bot and argued that the more they engage, the better support they will receive from the bot. The inclusion of management accountants is, on the one hand, positive as management accountants are framed as important actors in technological development. On the other hand, it creates certain expectations on them to perceive and engage with evolving technology in a certain way and perform some technician tasks, reshaping their role script.

Furthermore, Tech 1 has given presentations to the finance department several times, which probably has influenced the expectations of the management accountant's role. As Tech 1 explains, it is clear that some of the tasks done by the management accountants can be automated easily. A core competence for a management accountant has previously been knowing Excel formulas. As an AI bot can write this instead, management accountants have the possibility to do other tasks and find other core competencies that can create value for the business, Tech 1 explains.

“It doesn't have to automatically lead to the disappearance of the service. But they can move up the value chain and do other things instead. That's how it will be in finance, legal, HR, I think people will automate tasks that are done today. But it can instead be used to do other things that may have greater value. [...] If you have a controller that is not only a financial controller but also understands reading- and subscription behavior. Then, that person climbed up the value chain. [...] It will require personal skill development. It will be required to use the resources within the organization in the smartest possible ways. And that you use the AI tools in smart ways. But we're not there yet. In a year, I think we will be significantly more there than we are now. [...] For us in the media industry, this is nothing new. We have been involved in a lot of technological changes. So, there's no big drama about it. It's just a matter of understanding. Doing the right things. And to really think from the perspective of value creation as much as possible.” (Tech 1)

The CFO describes his thoughts of the future controller:

“Even more value-adding. Contributing to the strategic discussion rather than just rattling off numbers and keeping track of the numbers and stuff like that. [...] And it's like okay are we right staffed here, should we increase the number of employees here? Although we have the potential to increase revenue more because we're sort of overloaded or should we rather reduce because we're overstaffed so it's more that kind of reasoning, analyzing rather than just telling someone what your result was for these months?” (CFO)

What the quotes from Tech 1 and the CFO have in common is their expectations of the management accountant to become more value-creating considering technological advancements. Hence, the digitalization discourse inherently brings a new script of the management accountants' role as business partners, and certain ideas are inscribed in this expected script. Both Tech 1 and the CFO emphasize the importance of management accountants moving up the value chain by leveraging technology to perform higher-value tasks and contribute to strategic discussions and decision-making processes. The expected move beyond the traditional bean-counter role towards a business partner role (Burns & Baldvinsdóttir, 2005; Byrne & Pierce, 2007; Friedman & Lyne, 2001; Järvenpää, 2007) creates certain expectations on the management accountants to adapt their attitudes and skills set and potentially this creates pressure on the individual management accountant to meet new demand.

As outlined in this section, the digitalization discourse inherently reshapes the roles of management accountants at NewsCo. A discursive pressure materializes in the role script of a management accountant. Within the digitalization discourse, certain ideals, including standardization, efficiency, automation, and value creation, contribute to management accountants' expectations to interpret and engage with technology in a specific way. Accordingly, technology plays an important role in shaping the social identity of management accountants at NewsCo. In the next section, we will investigate how the outlined digitalization discourse and social identity affect the management accountants' individual self-identity.

#### 4.3. Individual management accountants' identity

As Watson (2008) argues, both the discourse and the social identity have implications for an individual's self-identity. Self-identities, according to Giddens (1991), are a result of participation in various competing discourses and experiences. This is also reflected in our empirical findings, indicating that the management accountants' self-identities are affected both by the digital discourse and the role scripts of management accountants at NewsCo. According to Alvesson & Wilmott (2002), self-identity is then sustained and reworked through identity work, including both conscious and unconscious efforts, in order to shape and maintain self-identity. In this section, the construction of the management accountants' identity will be explored, and their potential identity work resources will be identified.

##### 4.3.1. Management accountants' professional confidence

The management accountants in NewsCo identify themselves as highly skilled individuals and further present themselves as an essential part of the organization. From their perspective, they are the ones who have control over and an understanding of the numbers. They explain themselves as an important part of the financial development of the organization, and that the operations are dependent on them in order to understand the numbers. The management accountants' professional confidence is illustrated by the following quotes:

"I certainly think that being a business controller is an important profession. It's a crucial role. I believe that if we didn't exist, it would be almost impossible for the operations and the finance department to connect with each other. [...]. Many people in the operations also don't understand the results or what's being recorded. So, I think it's a very important link between them, being able to explain in both directions how these numbers depend on each other." (BC 10)

"I would say that we have quite a high status actually. I experience that many respect us and seek our opinions and input and are very willing to seek assistance from us to a great extent." (BC 8)

The management accountants' expressed confidence and strong position within the company stretches beyond their status. It also enables them to influence non-financial employees, or at least they strive to do so:

"It was a bit funny when we had a presentation in front of everyone in the advertising business and the reading business. Me and another Lead Business Controller then present the results, and it tends to take a while for this presentation. But then another participant said last time that yes, now we've been talking numbers for quite some time, but it's clear, what would NewsCo be without numbers?" (BC 3)

The quote further reflects the management accountants' striving to be considered key persons in analyzing and presenting financial information to stakeholders. The statement indicates that they take pride in their ability to convey the significance of numbers to the business areas within NewsCo. Additionally, it highlights their identity as facilitators of understanding and decision-making through financial insights. The overall confidence that all management accountants perceive might be related to the way the CFO interprets their role as important, knowledgeable, and number experts. The CFO delegates responsibility and freedom to the management accountants, which enables them to reinforce their self-identity as important and knowledgeable number experts.

The CFO's distinction between the BC role and the FC role is congruent with the management accountants' own interpretations. Even though both BCs and FCs perceive themselves as important in the context of number understanding, the financial controllers present themselves in a slightly different way. Instead of presenting themselves as key people in analyzing and presenting financial information to the business, they highlight the importance of producing accurate figures:

"It's rather significant figures, and considering the information I provide, it can heavily influence decisions for the board, making the information quite crucial for the board's direction or future decisions. Therefore, it's important I provide accurate information, so decisions aren't made based on erroneous material." (FC 6)

Their different ways of expressing themselves are also reflected in their use of technology. For example, the finance function has a BI tool that is almost solely used by the business controllers, although it is accessible to all management accountants, and there might be areas of use for all of them as well. This can be related to the way they perceive themselves and hence relate themselves to technology. The business controllers' identity as a link between finance and operations aligns with the use of the BI tool since the operational performance is structured according to business areas rather than legal entities. The financial controllers' identity as accounting experts aligns better with their

use of the ERP system since those numbers are structured according to legal entities and accounting practices. Hence, their different self-identities play a role in making sense of the digital tools offered, as illustrated in the following quotes:

“We have an organization that doesn't really relate to how the results are presented in the income statement, so we have got our own app [in the BI tool] that reflects the operational performance [...]. But if we hadn't had this app, it would have been very difficult to explain the results in the operation report.” (BC 10)

FC 1 explains his/her insignificant use of the BI tool:

“It's probably mostly that it doesn't match my duties. So that it's mainly for business controllers. Then there are certain parts that we have, but there is more potential I think for us in financial control. [...] It would probably be possible to build reports based on the balance sheet to a greater extent, which could facilitate the analysis of, for example, cash flow or other things. A lot is based on the income statement, of course in the BI tool. But I think there are other things you could do as well. It's probably because we have traditionally used the balance sheets directly from the ERP system. And there has been a greater need on the BC side to develop and build on the BI tool. I can imagine that's the reason that you put the effort there because there you are completely dependent on the BI tool to understand the business and operations.” (FC 1)

Based on the BC's use of the BI tool and supported by the FC's nonuse, it can be argued that the BC uses the tool as an identity work resource (Watson, 2008). By using the tool, they reinforce their identity as a link between finance and operations and facilitate their aspired business partner role by analyzing the business area's operating profit. Additionally, the fact that FCs do not use the BI tool to the same extent can also be considered an identity work resource, as their non-use distance themselves from the operational performance by instead using the ERP system, reinforcing their identity as accounting experts. In the following, the management accountants' internalization of the digitalization discourse and how it relates to their identity as professional confidant will be examined.

Overall, the management accountants refer to evolving technology positively. This perception about technology reflects the broader digitalization discourse surrounding NewsCo, which consists of ideas about technology's potential to automate processes and increase efficiency. The embedded norms about technology as an enabler are interpreted and referred to by the management accountants when talking about technology, as illustrated in the following quote:

"I see it [technological development] as positive. I think we will free up a lot of time. We will surely reach many conclusions that we wouldn't have otherwise. We will surely make many business decisions that we wouldn't have made without AI because

AI will be better than us at identifying trends and seeing potential in the data that we may not find. We are always limited by what we know. AI doesn't have limited resources or time or ability, so I think AI will be a great addition and change how we work. But we will still be needed." (BC 10)

Hence, BC 10's perception of technology is a translation of the broader discourse presented by the management. His/her acknowledgment of AI's ability to overcome limitations inherent in human cognition, such as time constraints and cognitive biases, further reflects the ideas within the digitalization discourse that emphasize the potential of technology in optimizing work processes and improving outcomes. Other respondents not only perceive the evolving technology as positive, but they also present themselves as even more relevant in the future, highlighting their identity as professional confidant. However, it is difficult to determine whether this is a disciplinary approach for them to make sense of their future role, or if they genuinely believe they will become even more important in the future.

"I believe that the more something becomes digital, the more important it becomes in our role to communicate and be engaged. Maintaining curiosity and continuously staying abreast of developments is important, I would say. And taking on new invisible roles because we see which parts need improvement. It's closely linked to digitalization and systems, being able to see where one could benefit from developing automation and systematization of processes." (BC 7)

BC 7 perceives a sense of responsibility for staying abreast of digital developments and taking an active role in driving organizational change and improvement through digitalization. The responsibility the respondent expresses can be interpreted as an internalization of the digitalization discourse in a disciplinary way; although not explicitly stated, this indicates an experience of discursive pressure, and there are no other options than to engage in technological advancements and become more efficient.

"I believe that the majority of the transactions will already be recorded, but then it will become more important, I believe, with the analysis and making the right decisions based on it. It will be more important to ensure that everything is correct so there are no incorrect flows. I think the analysis part will become much more important moving forward." (FC 6)

BC 7 and FC 6 both express themselves as even more relevant players in the light of evolving technology, demonstrating a self-identity characterized by a proactive approach to embracing digitalization and leveraging technology to enhance their professional contributions. How they express themselves can be considered a disciplinary way of internalizing the digitalization discourse to remain credible and relevant to management. Additionally, it can still be seen as an opportunity to elevate their aspired business partner identity. However, their confidence stems from different sources, resulting in different beliefs about their future relevance. The BC rationalizes its future relevance by

emphasizing communication, while the FC makes sense of its relevance by emphasizing the importance of numbers and accounting expertise. Referring to their professional confidence, both respondents dismiss the idea of replacing management accountants with digital tools, and thus, they emphasize their future relevance.

The perceived future relevance of management accountants is also demonstrated by their emphasis on their involvement in IT projects. In a case when not being involved, FC 1 expects an increased risk that the financial data in the systems is incorrect, and hence, he/she implicitly emphasizes his/her professional confidence.

“[...] It feels very important that you as financial controller follow and understand the pre-systems that generate data into the financial system. Because that is what builds the entire income statement and balance sheet. We work very closely with the product owners and ensure that what comes out of the system is correct and that we understand what we're looking at.” (FC 1)

The management accountants at NewsCo identify themselves as active and controlling participants in projects and development processes, rather than serving as passive observers or executors. This aligns with the social identity of management accountants as proactive and engaged strategic partners, as scripted by the CFO. The management accountants present an approach indicating that they are not concerned about technological advancements, but rather position themselves as crucial players essential for providing and interpreting accurate financial information. From a more critical perspective, one could argue that their decision to actively participate in IT development serves as a strategic maneuver to position themselves as significant contributors and showcase their future relevance.

#### 4.3.2. Construction of self-identities through standardization

As outlined in 4.2.2, by BC 1, the management accountants work to find scalable solutions, harmonize reporting, and streamline processes to reduce the time spent on manual tasks. Consequently, they expect to free up time that can be spent on analytical parts, facilitating their business partner role. The following quotes further illustrate the management accountants' willingness to streamline their work processes through standardization:

“Finding scalable models as we grow. So that it doesn't take too much time. [...] Both systems but also how you work yourself. How do you find good solutions so that it's not different for each company, because that takes a lot of time.” (FC 7)

“We've to be able to scale because we're 50 titles, so we can't sit and make a report for 50 titles every month, we've to find a way that works for everyone constantly. Then it can be that it didn't turn out great for one title, but it turned out well for the

most. Then we still have to go for it, just like you can't consider everyone without finding methods that simplify.” (BC 2)

As Alvesson & Wilmott (2002) describe, identity work can be both conscious and unconscious efforts to create and maintain identity. On the one hand, standardization and streamlining of processes are conscious choices made by management accountants in order to enhance their opportunities to engage more in strategic analysis, reinforcing their identity as business partners. Through standardization, management accountants aim to reduce the amount of time spent on manual tasks in order to increase the amount of time spent on tasks that the business can benefit from. BC 4 exemplifies such tasks, including supporting the business managers and increasing the number understanding of the operations. On the other hand, standardization might contradict the management accountants’ sense of self to be independent business partners. The respondents explain that they want to customize their reports to the receiver to maximize the benefit and bring out the most important messages to the business area managers. Their strive for customization is further shown in the way they use and make sense of digital tools. Despite the supply of different digital tools, including ERP systems, budget tools, and BI tools, the most used and appreciated tool is Excel:

“I extract a lot to Excel, even though I have a BI system, Excel still becomes the end product in some way. [...] It could be that I go into the BI tool and extract a report, and then I want to tidy it up a bit, add some comments in different places. It's probably a lot that the data is presented in a good way, but it's not something that's ready to be displayed there, basically. Instead, you export it to Excel and then create a slightly nicer end product.” (BC 3)

The strong trust in Excel also applies to the financial controllers:

“Excel is important because it can somehow link together everything, all systems. If you retrieve information from many different systems, you know that you can always assemble a good Excel analysis. And Excel is the basis for reconciliation of balance accounts and so on.” (FC 6)

The management accountants at NewsCo are offered several, compared to Excel, more high-tech tools. Consequently, it seems that the use of Excel has decreased to some extent, as described by BC 8:

“When I started, we only worked with Excel for reporting and follow-up, which meant that we had enormously heavy Excel Sheets, so there was so much data that it took like half an hour to download. Having the BI tool to follow up the various parts of the business. It's incredible” (BC 8)

However, despite new competition, Excel is referred to as the fundamental and most valued tool by all management accountants at NewsCo. From an identity perspective, the management accountants’ use of Excel can be identified as an identity work resource.

The toolbox offered to the management accountants at NewsCo, except for Excel, are more or less standardized and the respondents sometimes refer to those tools as somewhat limiting. The fact that they extract reports from these systems and then customize them in Excel further underscores the perceived limitations. Therefore, the extensive use of Excel by management accountants may represent an unconscious attempt to preserve their identity as independent, rather than being constrained by standardized processes. In other words, the standardization of systems restricts the controllers' ability to customize tools to suit their tasks, diminishing their sense of autonomy in tailoring their role. Thanks to the flexible nature of Excel, management accountants can establish their own processes and thus uphold their identity as independent business partners. Moreover, using Excel can strengthen their sense of being perceived as important in the organization through the gatekeeping mechanism. In this context, their Excel use is considered an unconscious effort since it contradicts their explicit expressions of a strive towards standardization; despite their conscious hard work towards standardization, they work against it unconsciously. Subsequently, the digitalization discourse is only partly internalized by the management accountants due to the misalignment between social identity and self-identity.

#### 4.3.3. Towards automation and value creation

The management accountants put a lot of hope into evolving technology, looking forward to getting rid of manual tasks and engaging more in proactive and value-adding tasks, which align better with their aspired identity:

“For companies, we get too well paid to sit and confirm invoices. We shouldn't do the manual tasks so much. That's not where our expertise lies either. [...]” (BC 10)

The expressed professional confidence appears to act as a driver towards technological development. The digital transformation of the finance function in NewsCo is evolving and one of the most recent system implementations is their BI tool, a system for analysis of data from various sources. Using the BI tool, reports that were previously conducted manually in Excel are now generated automatically in the BI system. The automatic features of the system enable the management accountants to focus more on value-adding activities and, thus, elevating their aspired identity as business partners.

“[...] So then I built my own app with a summary, then for each business area I show the result and forecast and the difference from the previous year and then what the differences are due to, is it within the reading business, is it advertising? and so on. Before, I did it in Excel, but then I checked with [Tech 3] if we could build our own app for it, and we could, which helped me a lot. Instead of doing this manually, I can click and get out deviation from the budget and forecast for the previous year. It's [the apps in the BI tool] like ready-made reports, and instead of having to manage the numbers and print out lots of things in Excel and link back and forth, we get it

out in our way as we want to see it. So, it helps me both in the job and with being able to send it to the business.” (BC 4)

The current development of technology at NewsCo is AI, and like the BI tool, AI brings hope for automation among the management accountants:

“People ask [management accountants] because they are a bit lazy or because they are not economists and ask the same things all the time, so you can get rid of that by gathering information and having a Finance bot. You can certainly simplify the job with trend analyses and comments that we write a lot. There are probably a lot of such functions that we are working on. I absolutely believe that it can become easier via AI or that it simply disappears, and you can work more with analyses instead. [...] We have a lot of repetitive tasks around the monthly closing process, and you do certain deviation analyses. I think you could get that easily via AI. [...] I want to work more strategically. I could imagine more analysis of market benchmarks and market trends. We might do some market analysis, but we could do more” (BC 3)

"I want to do more analysis of the numbers. [...] Ensuring accuracy has taken a lot of time now. I think we've good quality, but perhaps it's more that I believe many of us work overtime quite a bit, so you hope that 8 hours will be enough one day [with AI tools in place]." (FC 7)

Both FC and BC express an aspiration to perform more analysis. They explain that their time is not enough for that today, but they have a desire and hope that new technologies can free up more time and thus give them time to spend on analysis. FC 5 exemplifies that as a financial controller, you want to perform cash flow analysis. As a business controller, as explained by BC 3, you want to investigate drivers for the operational profit that can explain the result. The management accountants' positive attitudes towards the evolving technology, and especially AI, might be explained by the professional confidence they have developed, as presented in the 4.3.1. Hence, they feel confident in their own ability to perform the value-adding tasks and act as a business partner that is expected to be required of a future management accountant. From a more skeptical point of view, one can argue that they are aware that their current tasks might be automated, and presenting their professional confidence and expertise is a way to rationalize their future relevance.

On that note, the positivism around digital development may be an outcome of the internalization of the digitalization discourse. Two potential explanations for the management accountants' internalization of the discourse can be considered. Firstly, the discourse on digitalization becomes a matter of modernity for management accountants. If they perceive themselves as modern controllers, they may exert greater effort to internalize the discourse, as failure to do so could result in being perceived as outdated and backward within the organization. By aligning themselves with the norms and ideals

inherent in the discourse and the social identity, they can enhance their reputation and legitimacy, which highlights an opportunity aspect of the digitalization discourse.

Secondly, the ongoing business transformation signals that NewsCo is a modern company that should keep up with technological development. Based on how management accountants articulate themselves in the context of digitalization, it can be inferred that there is an underlying pressure to conform to a certain behavior, stemming from the business transformation within the newspaper industry. For instance, one management accountant expressed the imperative of digitalization, indicating pressure to contribute to the company's success through digital transformation. There is no alternative but to align with digital development. The management accountants adjust their identity in accordance with the discourse on digitalization, which illustrates a disciplinary aspect of the digitalization discourse. The explanation by FC 7 presents this disciplinary aspect:

“That's where we've to go, it's the only way to work. It must become more efficient and cost-effective. We can't go back. We've to use it [AI] more, above all, there's a lot now in the newspapers. I read that one of the local papers had AI-edited paper. I think it's cool, it goes so fast.” (FC 7)

It appears that evolving technology is not exclusively associated with increased efficiency among management accountants, but also with new work tasks. Both BC and FC strive towards engaging more in value-adding tasks, but their different types of expertise might affect what type of value creation they contribute to. The outlined key characteristics of the BC role in the social identity section, including networking and business orientation, align with the expected role transition towards engagement in value-adding activities, revolving around supporting activities to the business managers. The outlined technical accounting nature of the financial controllers' role, in contrast, implies a responsibility to ensure that the information in the systems is accurate and compliant according to current accounting regulations. Consequently, new technician tasks might occur due to emerging technology, as explained by FC 1:

"I think there has been a greater involvement required from the financial control side, to once again be close and set requirements for the pre-systems. As more and more parts are integrated into the pre-systems and into this business, you need to be close and ensure that the right output is generated. I think that has made a difference. That tech and finance have come closer together." (FC 1)

#### 4.3.4. Management accountants as gatekeepers and information providers

The evolving technology might affect not only the management accountants' work tasks but also their interactions within the organization. The role script of a management accountant involves a lot of interactions with others in the organization as described in 4.2.1, and the social capability seems to be an essential part of their identity as well. For FCs, interactions primarily occur within the finance function, whereas for BCs, there are

numerous interactions with employees in operations as well. The advancement of AI raises potential concerns regarding human interactions, particularly for BCs, which identify themselves as partners communicating crucial information to business managers. With AI tools implemented, a decrease in interactions may be anticipated, as elaborated below:

“It's good with AI because if the editor-in-chief asks me a question then I can ask AI and I will get an answer quickly and then it's like ok but can he go directly and ask AI? The role of gatekeeper in relation to the data will be weakened, and you'll have to find your niche where you know things that you cannot ask AI. [...]” (BC 11)

As described in section 4.1.3, NewsCo already has several AI bots in place. During a monthly finance meeting, observations were made on the discussions about the Finance AI bot that is under development. Tech 2 presented the bot, and further discussions among the finance people primarily circulated around accessibility where two different options were discussed: either to make the bot accessible to the entire organization or to limit access to the finance function. By selecting the first option, the main purpose of the bot is to answer the questions from the operations that would otherwise have been answered by a management accountant, potentially saving them a lot of time. However, while an open bot enhances the management accountants' efficiency, enabling them to spend more time on business partner activities, it also weakens their gatekeeping mechanism. Interactions, including the gatekeeping mechanism, are an integral part of the business controller's professional confidence and identity as a business partner. Consequently, the bot poses a potential identity threat by diminishing the operation's need for management accountants' presentations. Their identity as a control mechanism is thus threatened since the AI bot replaces their task to interact with, present and describe the numbers to the operations. The management accountants explicitly describe a concern about the numbers being misinterpreted by the operation when presented without context or a comprehensive description:

“It would just be a good scenario. [...] but depending on the recipient. So I think there's still a need to get it presented in order to understand the numbers. Many people are used to reading numbers, but we work for publishers and editors-in-chief. Some are very interested but not everyone has numbers as their main interest, but they are journalist [...] and they often want you to come and present how things have gone.” (BC 2)

“It's likely that AI can answer questions and perform tasks that a person might otherwise ask their controller. But at the same time, I believe that sometimes one may need to understand what lies behind the numbers and the controller can contribute to this understanding. Yes, AI is good in many ways, but perhaps it can't always see what has happened that has affected this figure or other things. They are like facts, this is how it looks, and this is how it looked before, and here is the change [...]. I

believe that for a controller having this understanding and feeling is still very important, so I don't think that can be replaced with AI." (BC 8)

The second option, to limit the access of the bot to the finance function, enables the management accountants to increase their efficiency while maintaining their identity as a control mechanism. The hope the management accountants put into the AI bot circulates around getting assistance with more advanced analysis and real-time trends as well as getting rid of repetitive tasks. By keeping the bot closed within the finance function, the management accountants can feed it with more extensive financial information, enhancing their analysis, and simultaneously keep the operations dependent on them through a strengthened gatekeeping mechanism.

"The absolute biggest thing now feels like AI, how it will affect our job. I really don't think it will take away our job because our job is so much about people, but it will be very exciting to see how it will facilitate. For example, we write a lot of comments and do a lot of result reports and stuff, and it's generally a pretty boring part of our job, sitting and writing comments or just compiling numbers, and it would be fantastic if AI could eventually free up time for more rewarding tasks because there are more rewarding things than sitting and compiling data." (BC 10)

It could be argued that an AI bot has the potential to serve as an identity work resource for management accountants. Within the AI discourse, there are certain ideals, such as weakened control and gatekeeping, that do not align with the self-identity of management accountants and trigger identity work. By restricting access to the bot to the finance function, management accountants can maintain their identity as a control mechanism while simultaneously advancing their aspired identity as trusted advisors.

Regardless of whether the Finance AI bot is open for the whole organization or limited to the finance department, the management accountants still need to provide the Finance AI bot with information. As presented by Tech 2 during the finance meeting, they have to integrate process descriptions, accounting regulations, and internal documents into the AI bot, as well as ensuring accuracy of the numbers retrieved from the bot. Currently, as Tech 1 describes, when NewsCo does not have harmonized systems, it is not possible to integrate AI with the systems in place, but the management accountants themselves must provide the AI bot with the information. Initially, it can create more work for the management accountants, and for the management accountants, this work can be classified as manual, non-value-adding tasks. Hence, it could be argued that an AI bot works both enabling, elevating business partner opportunities, and constraining, resulting in bean-counter work. The increased workload due to the implementation of the Finance AI bot is probably applicable both to FC and BC, but perhaps to an even greater extent for the financial controllers due to their accounting expertise.

#### 4.4. Synthesizing the implications for identity construction of management accountants at NewsCo

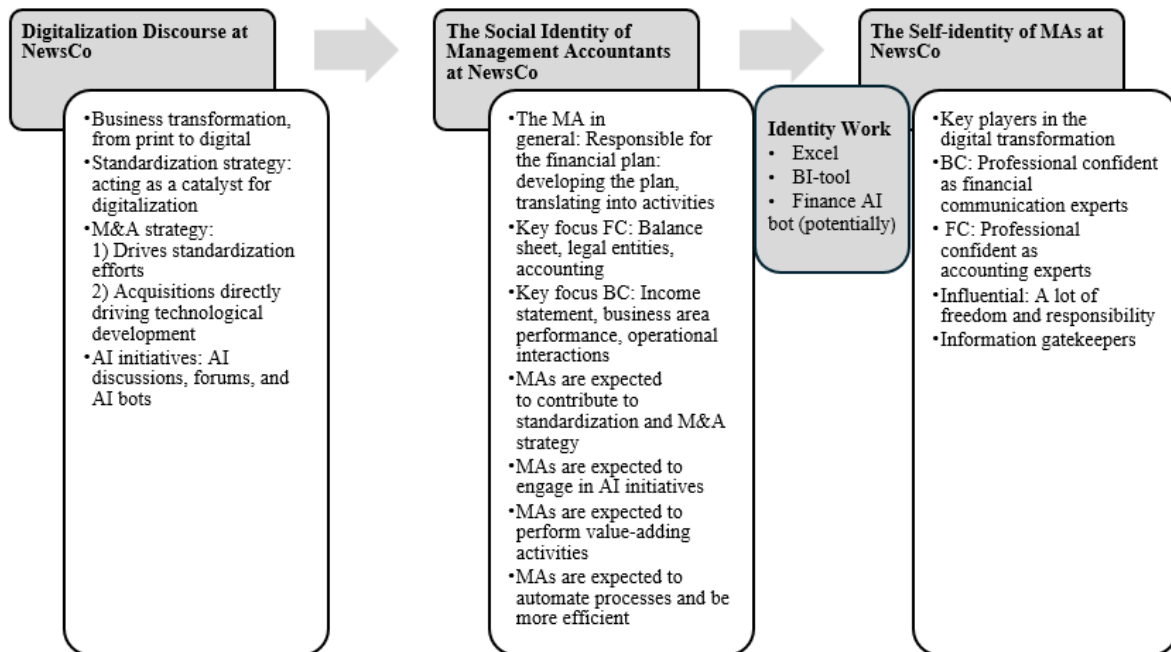


Figure 2. Overview of the Implications for Identity Construction of Management Accountants at NewsCo based on the theoretical framework.

As Figure 2 illustrates, the management accountants internalize the digitalization discourse into their identity. The empirical analysis suggests that management accountants do it in a disciplinary way, as they have no other option than to obey. However, within the disciplinary aspects, there are also opportunities for management accountants. On the disciplinary side, the digitalization discourse consists of managerial pressure on management accountants to engage in standardization and integration efforts, to contribute to technological development, to hand over nonvalue-adding tasks to AI, to engage more in analysis and strategic activities, and to become more efficient thanks to automation and the digital tools offered. Consequently, the disciplinary aspects create a sense of urgency among management accountants to embrace technological innovations and enhance their skill set to meet evolving demands. On the opportunity side, the digitalization discourse brings a lot of hope to management accountants: the opportunities to be perceived as modern and legitimate, to get rid of boring tasks, and to elevate their aspired business partner role.

The internalization of the digitalization discourse appears to take different forms depending on the management accountant's different role scripts in NewsCo. They all describe themselves as key players in technological development but in a slightly different way. The FCs, on the one hand, rationalize their future relevance by emphasizing

their accounting expertise. The BCs, on the other hand, rationalize their relevance by addressing their communication skills.

The digitalization discourse is not completely internalized into the management accountants' identity due to tensions between the discourse, social identity, and their self-identity. Those tensions are processed by the management accountants in their identity work. Our findings suggest three different identity work resources: The BI tool, Excel, and AI. Firstly, through the BI tool, the business controllers strengthen their identity as information providers to the business operations. Subsequently, the financial controllers' non-use of the BI tool strengthens their identity as accounting experts. Secondly, the management accountants refer to the standardization as positive, longing for increased efficiency. However, the standardization of systems limits customization, inhibiting the management accountants' sense of flexibility and freedom to tailor their roles. Through Excel use, the management accountants enhance their opportunities to customize their work and, hence, unconsciously work against standardization. Thirdly, The Finance AI bot appears as a potential identity work resource. The AI discourse consists of ideas that trigger the management accountants' identity work due to misalignment with their self-identity. Those tensions can be managed by limiting access to the function, similarly to the case with their Excel sheets.

## 5. Concluding discussion

In this study, we analyze how management accountants construct themselves in the light of evolving technology. The analysis is focused on the interplay between the digitalization discourse, the role script of management accountants at NewsCo and their self-identity, which is constructed, reconstructed, and maintained through identity work (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Watson, 2008). Whereas previous literature explores the changing occupational role of management accountants through technology (Andreassen, 2020; Carlsson-Wall et al., 2022; Carlsson-Wall & Strömsten, 2018; Goretzki et al. 2018; Järvenpää, 2007), this study contributes to the academic discussion by investigating the implications of evolving technology on the self-identity. A few scholars have already considered the identity aspect within an IT context (Morales & Lambert, 2013; Heinzlmann, 2018, Rautiainen et al., 2024), yet the discursive implications remain uninvestigated.

Our empirical analysis reveals that management accountants internalize the digitalization discourse. They construct and present themselves in accordance with the evolving technology in a disciplinary way, striving for meaning in their occupational self-identity and as an opportunity to shift from bean counter to business partners. In addition, management accountants engage in identity work to facilitate the internalization of the discourse, but on the contrary, they simultaneously engage in identity work to restrict the full internalization of the discourse as they want to maintain their self-identity in a certain way. Furthermore, the empirical analysis suggests that a management accountant's discursive internalization on the self-identity is shaped by the management accountant's role script. The management accountants in the case company are distinguished into two roles, business controllers and financial controllers, and it is clear that the two roles make sense of the digitalization discourse in different ways. Subsequently, their use of technology is a reflection both of their self-identity and their role script.

### 5.1. Internalization of the digitalization discourse

One of the main contributions of this paper is the management accountants' internalization of the digitalization discourse. There is a discourse that entails expectations and ideals of what management accountants should do, and a disciplinary aspect of internalization has been identified. The evolving technology, from ERP system to today's use of AI, contributes to a constant present digitalization discourse within organizations. The ongoing discourse about the evolving technology and its implications on management accountants are presented both in previous literature (Andreassen, 2020; Cavélius et al., 2020; Firk et al., 2024; Frey & Osborne, 2017; Moll & Yigitbasioğlu, 2019; Sundström, 2024) and in a practical context (Deloitte, 2020; Parks, 2024). This study demonstrates that the digitalization discourse extends to a micro-level organizational context as well. The discussion on a discursive level creates certain

demands, expectations, hopes, and concerns among management accountants, and they have to make sense of what these types of discussions mean to them.

The existing literature on the topic presents mixed views, including both hopes and concerns about technological development. Frey & Osborne (2017) argue that the tasks performed by management accountants will probably be replaced by technology, which can conceivably create concerns among the management accountants. Consequently, a potential reaction of the management accountants could be to behave hesitantly to the evolving technology. Interestingly, our empirical findings suggest that this hesitation is not as evident. Despite acknowledging that technology has the potential to replace existing tasks, management accountants choose to perceive technology positively for their profession. Not only do the management accountants perceive the digital transformation as positive, but the management also frames the digital transformation positively, thereby implying an underlying optimism within the digitalization discourse. The positive framing in this case may stem from the ongoing business transformation within the newspaper industry, as the company is compelled to adapt in order to maintain competitiveness. Thereby, our findings demonstrate that industry-specific factors influence the formation of the discourse. The management accountants find themselves in a setting where the discourse is dominant, leaving them with no choice but to align with digital advancements. Subsequently, they adjust their identity in accordance with the discourse surrounding digitalization and thus, the internalization of the discourse has disciplinary aspects.

Furthermore, the study adds nuance to the attitudes of management accountants toward digitalization, contributing to the work of Firk et al. (2024) and Nach (2015). Firk et al. (2024) contend that digital anxiety, encompassing fears and concerns, can diminish employees' work engagement and impede digital transformation efforts. However, our study does not suggest anxiety among the management accountants, which can be partly explained by Firk et al.'s. (2024) findings that digital training and transformational leadership have the potential to reduce digital anxiety among employees. Our empirics reveal aspects that probably decrease digital anxiety among the management accounting team. For example, AI forums, managers positively communicate about technology, tech employees continuously inform management accountants about new possibilities, and furthermore, having a "tech employee" within the management accounting team. All these aspects potentially diminish digital anxiety and foster the internalization of the digitalization discourse. The internalization of the digitalization discourse can be further understood by Järvenpää (2007) and Goretzki et al. (2013). They emphasize the significance of organizational factors, such as role modeling, training, and employee identity formation, as a means of exerting control to drive cultural change within the management accounting department. They argue that these organizational factors can facilitate the adoption of the business partner role, which is similar to how our study shows that such aspects facilitate the internalization of the digitalization discourse. The

discourse on technology within NewsCo's management enables greater involvement of management accountants in advisory tasks and managerial activities. Consequently, the internalization of the digitalization discourse creates opportunities for management accountants to act as strategic partners and engage in value-added activities. Despite the disciplining effect of this internalization, management accountants find themselves in an environment where focusing on value addition is imperative to maintain relevance within the organization. Thus, while the disciplining aspect may be perceived as constraining, it ultimately serves as a positive force for them.

In addition to business context and organizational factors, our study suggests that management accountants' existing self-identity influences their internalization of the discourse. In light of prior research, one might anticipate anxiety among management accountants stemming from the heightened expectations placed on them to be more value-adding and to engage in strategic activities (Firk et al., 2024). Interestingly, management accountants at NewsCo view the discourse on digitalization positively. However, their optimism may be driven by fear; it would be difficult for them to express negativity, as doing so might compromise their image as modern and credible professionals. Another potential explanation for their positive outlook, rather than anxiety, is their professional confidence. Their confidence enables them to perceive themselves as capable and proficient enough to undertake value-added activities, with some even expressing themselves as overly competent for routine tasks. By insights from Nach (2015), our findings indicate that nonresistance among management accountants can be explained by a perception that evolving technology facilitates their identity rather than constraining it. In particular, the embedded ideas about value creation within the discourse align with their aspired identity, facilitating the internalization of the discourse. However, while the management accountants largely internalize the discourse, there is some resistance to complete assimilation, which could be attributed to a misalignment between discursive ideals and their aspired identity. The extensive use of Excel by the management accountants illustrates their resistance to the discourse, possibly due to a perception that technology limits their ability to customize their work. By examining how management accountants construct their identities in relation to evolving technology, this study contributes to Nach's (2015) research by affirming the correlation between IT and identity, albeit within the context of management accounting.

Moreover, we argue that Watson's (2008) framework is suitable for management accounting research to explore the interplay of management accountants' identity, role script, and IT and adds a new perspective to the discussion. Watson (2008) provides a discursive approach to management accountants' identity, which is especially relevant to examine in the light of evolving technology and increasingly IT-driven accounting and finance functions. In particular, Watson's (2008) discursive approach to identity implies that technology is part of management accountants' identity work, which presents a research gap within the management accounting field.

## 5.2. Technology as an identity work resource

The identification of technology as an identity work resource presents our second contribution. In the process of internalizing the digitalization discourse, tensions arise as all ideals that are embedded within the discourse do not align with the management accountants' existing role script and self-identity. Those tensions are handled in the management accountants' identity work (Watson, 2008). Our findings show that the IT systems and tools offered to management accountants function as identity work resources (Alvesson & Wilmott, 2002), and the evolving technology can, therefore, enable the construction of management accountants' identities.

Firstly, the standardization idea within the discourse presents an unconscious identity conflict among management accountants. Standardization, on the one hand, aligns with their aspired identity to be more efficient, value-creating, and thus enhance their aspired business partner role. On the other hand, standardization contradicts their aspired business partner role because it eliminates their independence and customization opportunities. Accordingly, Excel acts as an identity work resource. Through the management accountants' extensive use of Excel, and hence their less use of standardized systems, they can maintain their identity as independent despite the standardization strategy in the company. More specifically, using Excel enables them to continuously tailor their work according to their preferences. Thereby, the management accountants' aspired identity as trusted advisors and business partners is enhanced through their use of Excel.

Goretzki et al. (2018) argue that VAS can serve as a reference point and be used for knowledge transformation when evaluating a standardized system. The management accountants' Excel use illustrates the presence of VAS; a local system used in order to customize the report according to own preferences, rather than using reports from standardized systems. This outcome acts congruent to Goretzki et al. (2018), who argue that a standardized system may threaten actors' power over knowledge creation; a VAS can be used as a tool that enables them to produce the knowledge necessary to perform their specific tasks. Our study contributes to the findings by Goretzki et al. (2018) by bringing the concept of VAS one step further. In addition to the features of VAS as knowledge transformation and reference point when evaluating standardized systems, our findings suggest that VAS also can act as an identity work resource (Alvesson & Wilmott, 2002). The management accountants' aspired business partner identity is enhanced through their Excel use, even though it seems to constitute an unconscious identity work resource. Interestingly, with insights from Goretzki et al. (2018), standardization initiatives appear to not exclusively bring positive outcomes despite being framed in a positive way within the company. Although the management accountants explain a positive attitude towards standardization, our findings indicate a mismatch between their aspired identity as (more) efficient and their existing identity as independent, trusted

advisors. This finding aligns with Goretzki & Pfister (2023), who argue that there are not only positive aspects of efficiency; too much simplicity can lead to undermining the identity as a business partner. Bringing this insight about simplicity into this study, the standardization efforts potentially imply a risk that the management accountants' business partner role is undermined. Thus, their extensive Excel use might be regarded as a way to mitigate the risk of being undermined, illustrating its function as an identity work resource.

Secondly, a Finance AI bot can be considered as a (potential) identity work resource. The Finance bot at the case company is not yet in place, however, the management accountants' thoughts about the upcoming bot bring some interesting aspects. As presented in the empirics, the business controllers portray themselves as the main ones responsible for the operational number understanding in the company and as key persons in providing the business with the numbers through regular interactions. By restricting access to the bot solely to the finance function, management accountants can position themselves as business partners without compromising their gatekeeping role. These findings align with Goretzki et al.'s. (2013) research, which illustrates how management accountants position themselves in relation to ERP systems. Thus, our study suggests that the findings of Goretzki et al. (2013) are not limited exclusively to ERP systems but also apply to evolving technology in general. By limiting bot access to the finance function, potential identity conflicts can be managed: management accountants can enhance their efficiency using the bot while simultaneously upholding their identity as gatekeepers and business partners within the organization. This approach to interpreting the AI tools provided illustrates how management accountants may utilize them as a resource for identity work, thereby strengthening their identity as business partners.

Heinzelmann (2018) argues that identity work is triggered by technology. Our findings go one step further, indicating that technology not only triggers identity work but also plays a key role in identity work processes. In particular, we contribute to the existing literature about identity work by illustrating how management accountants use technology to manage identity conflicts and, hence, construct, maintain, and reconstruct their self-identity.

### 5.3. Diverse business partner aspirations in a digital era

Our third contribution adds nuance to the existing business partner discussion by arguing that the way management accountants relate themselves to the business partner role in a digital era is attributable to their different role scripts and areas of expertise. Drawing on Watson's (2008) framework in our analysis, the findings indicate that the internalization of the digitalization discourse varies among management accountants due to differences in their role scripts. Our study covers two different types of management accountants: business controllers and financial controllers, both having similar educational

backgrounds, working under the same manager, and they both express a strive to move away from bean-counter tasks towards business partner tasks. However, their expressed professional confidence stems from different sources of expertise and social identities. The business controllers, on the one hand, rationalize their relevance by emphasizing their strong communication skills and interaction with operations, and the financial controllers, on the other hand, rationalize their relevance by highlighting their numbers and accounting skills. Consequently, their aspired identity as business partners in the light of evolving technology is framed differently.

The business controllers' aspirations of a business partner align with the generally accepted definition according to existing literature; they want to become even closer to the business operations and to engage more in value-adding activities such as strategic analysis, problem-solving, and managerial decision-making (Burns & Baldvinsdóttir, 2005; Byrne & Pierce 2007; Friedman & Lyne, 2001; Järvenpää 2007). Furthermore, their use of the BI tool reinforces their aspired identity as business partners, enabling them to report operational profit and become closer to the operations. The business controllers' use of the BI tool can be considered a conscious identity work resource, facilitating their aspired business partner identity. This finding challenges Heinzelmänn (2018), who argues that using an IT system deviates from the business partner ideal and makes them distance themselves from operations. In contrast, our study exemplifies how a digital tool can facilitate the business partner role.

The financial controllers frame their aspired identity as business partners differently. Rather than linking the role to narratives around strategy and operations, their business partner aspiration encompasses strong collaboration with the product owners to ensure compliance and accuracy of the financial data in the IT systems. Their professional confidence revolves around their accounting expertise and bringing this expertise into the value creation discussion, the result appears to be a control mechanism in developing evolving technology and assuring accuracy and regulatory compliance. According to existing research, the financial controller's new tasks are to be considered undesirable, dirty work (Morales & Lambert, 2013) or bean-counter tasks (Burns & Baldvinsdóttir, 2005; Byrne & Pierce, 2007; Friedman & Lyne, 2001; Järvenpää 2007;). Our study confirms Moll & Yigitbasioglu (2019) and Cavélius et al.'s. (2020) findings about new work tasks arising from evolving technology. Yet, our findings challenge Cavélius et al. (2020) statement that digitalization might lead to undesired, technician tasks rather than business partner's tasks. The financial controllers at NewsCo do not consider these tasks as undesired, but rather frame their potential new tasks as enablers for their role as business partners in a digital era. Hence, the financial controllers' perceived business partner role as a control mechanism in the development of IT systems might be explained by their professional confidence in terms of accounting expertise.

The two distinct business partner aspirations identified in our study challenge the existing research by suggesting that the different types of role scripts, and hence professional confidence influence how a management accountant constructs their business partner aspiration in the light of evolving technology. Additionally, the two distinct business partner aspirations identified might explain why technology is used differently. Instead of everyone using new, modern, evolving technology, management accountants tailor their use of technological tools to facilitate their aspirational identity as business partners, as is the case with the BI tool. Lastly, our study contributes to the identity discussion by illustrating that the individual management accountant's aspired business partner identity does not necessarily align with the general business partner definition.

#### 5.4. Limitations and future research

Finally, it is important to acknowledge certain limitations in this study when assessing its contributions. As illustrated by Cavélius et al. (2020), reviewing the effects of digitalization on management accountants is complex, and previous literature presents ambiguous views (Andreassen, 2020; Carlsson-Wall et al., 2022; Frey & Osborne, 2017; Goretzki et al., 2023; Heinzelmann, 2018; Morales & Lambert, 2013; Rautiainen et al., 2024). By conducting interviews with management accountants at NewsCo, we aimed to understand how they relate themselves to evolving technology and how they make sense of the digital tools offered at their workplace. We identified a strong digitalization discourse in the case company during the interviews. Through our abductive approach, Watson's (2008) framework emerged as appropriate to understand the discursive implications on management accountants. However, the specific circumstances of the case company can be a limitation of our study. The chosen company operates within a niche industry where the business model is undergoing a digital transformation, and probably the digitalization discourse is more tangible in our case compared to many other industries which can explain why management accountants have such a positive view of digitalization. In terms of future research, we suggest that future studies explore the implications of the digitalization discourse on management accountants working within other industries and conduct a comparable analysis of the implications.

Our findings are based on data from management accountants who are all employed by the same company, limiting our opportunities to generalize the findings. The role of management accountants in the light of digitalization is widely discussed in the academic world. Yet, the identity perspective has received insignificant attention. People and organizations have been affected by technological development over the last 30 years (Carlsson-Wall & Strömsten, 2018), and there are few indications that it will stop. Hence, it appears that technological development will be an ongoing phenomenon that people in organizations must get used to, rather than waiting for it to end. We suggest that future micro-level research on management accountants is needed to fully understand how they deal with expectations, pressure, hope, and concerns in their identity work.

On that note, our study suggests a challenge in distinguishing between inward and outward-oriented identity work (Watson, 2009). The research method, particularly interviews, poses a risk that management accountants may attempt to portray themselves in a specific manner for the researchers. To mitigate the impact of impression management on empirical findings, we recommend future research extending over a longer duration, combining interviews with other data sources such as written materials or observations.

Another limitation arises from the number of interviews held. Foremost, interviews have been held with management accountants to collect data from their perceptions, complemented by a few management interviews. However, more interviews with people outside the finance function could have been preferred to better understand the interface between management accountants' perceptions and discourse. By having interviews with more individuals from the management teams and business area managers, a more comprehensive understanding of the discourse can potentially be achieved. Hence, another suggestion for future research is to conduct more interviews and to weigh the number of interviews more equally between management accountants and decision-making managers in the business areas.

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## 7. Appendices

### 7.1. Appendix A – Interview table

| #  | Interviewee ID             | Title                                      | Date       | Length | Form of interview  |
|----|----------------------------|--------------------------------------------|------------|--------|--------------------|
| 1  | BC 1                       | Lead Business Controller                   | 26-02-2024 | 53 min | Physical interview |
| 2  | CFO                        | CFO                                        | 26-02-2024 | 57 min | Digital interview  |
| 3  | Strategy and M&A 1 / BC 11 | Strategy and M&A/ Lead Business Controller | 27-02-2024 | 51 min | Physical interview |
| 4  | BC 2                       | Lead Business Controller                   | 27-02-2024 | 62 min | Digital interview  |
| 5  | BC 3                       | Lead Business Controller                   | 27-02-2024 | 61 min | Physical interview |
| 6  | BC 4                       | Lead Business Controller                   | 28-02-2024 | 55 min | Digital interview  |
| 7  | Strategy and M&A 2         | Strategy and M&A                           | 28-02-2024 | 43 min | Digital interview  |
| 8  | BC 5                       | Lead Business Controller                   | 29-02-2024 | 53 min | Digital interview  |
| 9  | BC 6                       | Lead Business Controller                   | 01-03-2024 | 55 min | Digital interview  |
| 10 | FC 1                       | Senior Financial Controller                | 01-03-2024 | 57 min | Digital interview  |
| 11 | FC 2                       | Head of Financial Control                  | 05-03-2024 | 62 min | Digital interview  |
| 12 | Tech 1                     | Editorial development manager              | 06-03-2024 | 49 min | Physical interview |
| 13 | Tech 2                     | Chief Architect                            | 06-03-2024 | 51 min | Digital interview  |
| 14 | FC 3                       | Head of the Accounting Group               | 07-03-2024 | 63 min | Digital interview  |
| 15 | PF                         | Head of Procurement and Facilities         | 07-03-2024 | 55 min | Physical interview |
| 16 | FC 4                       | Accounting Team Lead                       | 08-03-2024 | 55 min | Digital interview  |
| 17 | BC 7                       | Lead Business Controller                   | 08-03-2024 | 52 min | Digital interview  |
| 18 | BC 8                       | Lead Business Controller                   | 11-03-2024 | 59 min | Digital interview  |
| 19 | Tech 3                     | BI-developer Finance                       | 11-03-2024 | 43 min | Digital interview  |
| 20 | BC 9                       | Business Controller                        | 12-03-2024 | 57 min | Digital interview  |
| 21 | BC 10                      | Business Controller                        | 12-03-2024 | 57 min | Digital interview  |
| 22 | FC 5                       | Financial Controller                       | 14-03-2024 | 53 min | Digital interview  |
| 23 | FC 6                       | Financial Controller                       | 14-03-2024 | 52 min | Digital interview  |
| 24 | FC 7                       | Financial Controller                       | 14-03-2024 | 48 min | Digital interview  |

## 7.2. Appendix B – Condensed interview guide for management accountants

| Theme                           | Example questions                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | Interest                                                                                                                          |
|---------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| The management accountant role  | How do you describe your role and responsibilities as a management accountant?                                                                                                                                                                | To gain an understanding of the individual perception and aspiration of the role as management accountant.                        |
|                                 | Which people do you interact with and what types of questions are those interactions usually about?                                                                                                                                           |                                                                                                                                   |
|                                 | How do you balance the demands and expectations of the different people or teams you are working with?                                                                                                                                        |                                                                                                                                   |
|                                 | In what way do you think your role and the tasks you perform are important for NewsCo?                                                                                                                                                        |                                                                                                                                   |
| Use of technological tools      | How do you envision your future as a management accountant? What are some of the opportunities or changes that you anticipate or hope for in your career?                                                                                     | To get insights into how management accountants relate themselves to technology in their daily work.                              |
|                                 | How do you perceive that technology in general facilitates your work?                                                                                                                                                                         |                                                                                                                                   |
|                                 | What are the main challenges regarding technology in your role?                                                                                                                                                                               |                                                                                                                                   |
|                                 | To what extent do you perceive that technology has changed your role and/or enabled you to engage in new tasks within NewsCo?                                                                                                                 |                                                                                                                                   |
| Development of new technologies | How would you describe your involvement in the development of new technologies? Are you satisfied with the level of involvement?                                                                                                              | To gather insights into the individual management accountant's interpretation of their involvement in the technology development. |
|                                 | How would you describe the collaboration between the controller and IT department?<br>Follow-up Q: Do you sometimes encounter situations where you feel that you and IT are thinking differently about specific topics, issues, or questions? |                                                                                                                                   |
| Digitalization trends           | How do you think that digitalization relates to and affects NewsCo?                                                                                                                                                                           | To create an understanding of the individual management accountant's perceptions and aspirations of evolving technology.          |
|                                 | What do you feel about AI and how do you reflect on what role AI might play for you as a management accountant?                                                                                                                               |                                                                                                                                   |
|                                 | How do you feel about the development of AI and Big Data or Digitalization in general? Do you have any concerns or expectations about the development?                                                                                        |                                                                                                                                   |

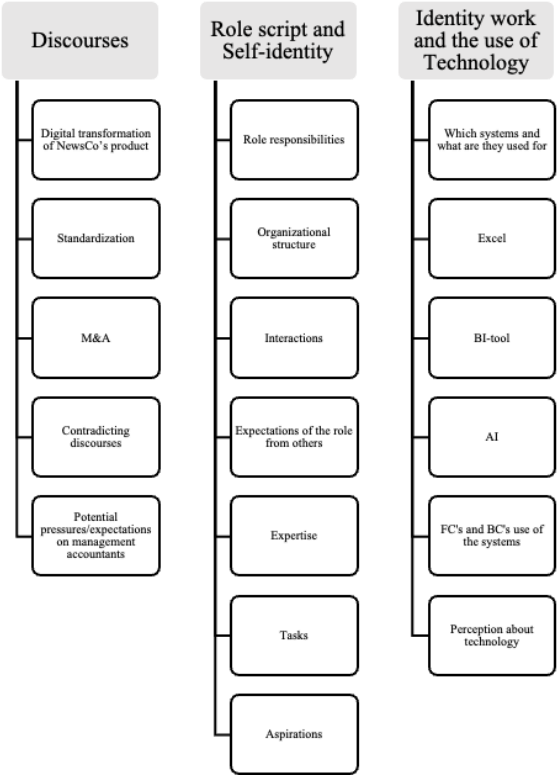
### 7.3. Appendix C – Condensed interview guide for IT employees

| Theme                           | Example questions                                                                                                                                                                                                                       | Interest                                                                                             |
|---------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| The IT role                     | How is the IT environment organized in NewsCo?                                                                                                                                                                                          | To understand how the IT function works in NewsCo and how it relates to other functions.             |
|                                 | How do you balance the demands and expectations of the different people or teams you are working with?                                                                                                                                  |                                                                                                      |
|                                 | What are the biggest challenges for you in performing your role?                                                                                                                                                                        |                                                                                                      |
| IT x management accountants     | How would you describe the collaboration between the management accountants and IT? Do you sometimes encounter situations where you feel that you and controllers are thinking differently about specific topics, issues, or questions? | To get insights into the management accountants' attitudes towards technology from IT's perspective. |
|                                 | To what extent do you perceive that management accountants are receptive for new digital initiatives?                                                                                                                                   |                                                                                                      |
|                                 | How do you perceive that the management accountant's role is affected by technology?                                                                                                                                                    |                                                                                                      |
| Development of new technologies | Can you describe the process of implementing a new tool for the finance function: Which people are involved, who are the decision makers, what are the resources, time aspect etc.?                                                     | To create an understanding of the current technological development in the finance function.         |
|                                 | Have you initiated a discussion of a new tool for the finance function? If yes, can you describe that case?                                                                                                                             |                                                                                                      |
|                                 | To what extent does the management accounting function ask for new or other types of technological tools that they do not have today?                                                                                                   |                                                                                                      |
| Digitalization trends           | How do you think that digitalization relates to and affects NewsCo?                                                                                                                                                                     | To gather insights about the digitalization discourse within NewsCo, from an IT perspective.         |
|                                 | How do you reflect on what role AI might play for NewsCo in general and for management accountants in particular?                                                                                                                       |                                                                                                      |
|                                 | How do you think business managers' use of information in e.g. decision-making might change in the future? How do you think this might affect the role of support functions like finance?                                               |                                                                                                      |

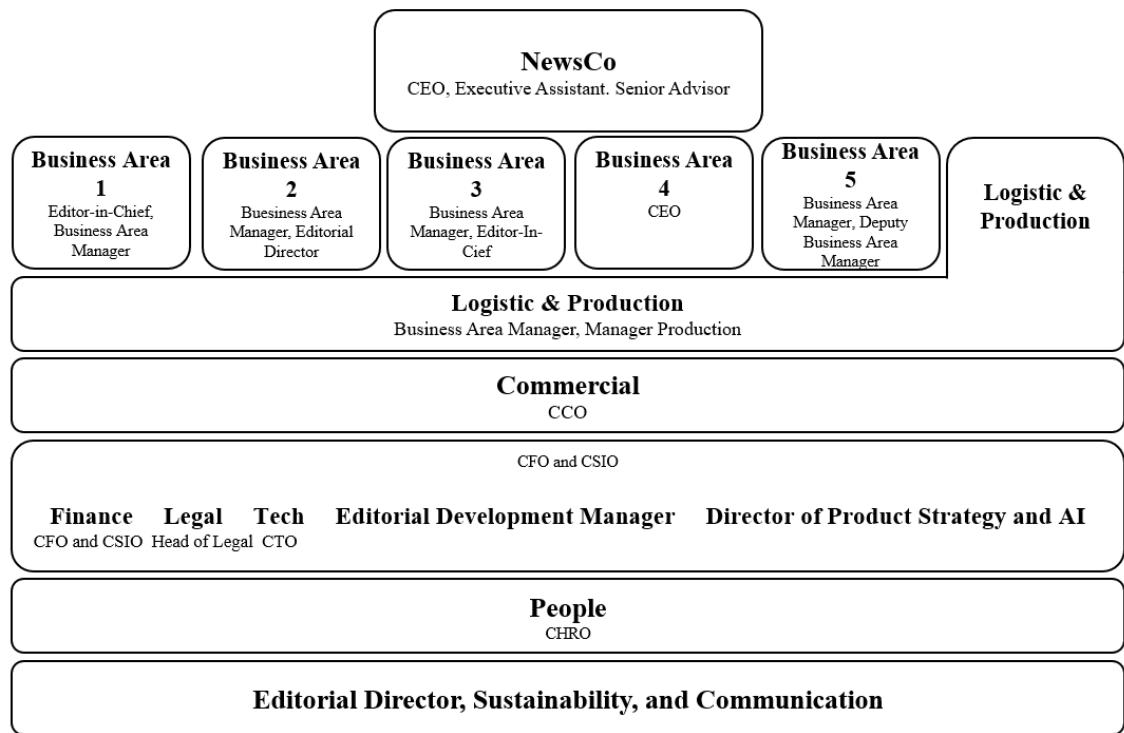
#### 7.4. Appendix D – Condensed interview guide for strategy employees

| Theme                            | Example questions                                                                                      | Interest                                                                                  |
|----------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| The strategy role                | How is the strategy work structured in NewsCo?                                                         | To understand how the strategy function works in NewsCo.                                  |
|                                  | How do you balance the demands and expectations of the different people or teams you are working with? |                                                                                           |
| Strategy & Management accounting | What is management accountants' role in supporting strategic decisions?                                | To get insights into the management accountants' role in strategic work.                  |
|                                  | What type of support do you need from management accountants in your work?                             |                                                                                           |
| IT-strategy                      | How does the strategy work relate to IT development?                                                   | To create an understanding of the technological development from a strategic perspective. |
|                                  | What has been focused on mostly in the past regarding IT strategy and what is the focus going forward? |                                                                                           |
|                                  | What are the main challenges regarding IT strategies?                                                  |                                                                                           |
| Digitalization trends            | How do you think that digitalization relates to and affects NewsCo?                                    | To gather insights about the digitalization within NewsCo from a strategy perspective.    |
|                                  | How is AI related to information used in decision-making and strategy processes?                       |                                                                                           |

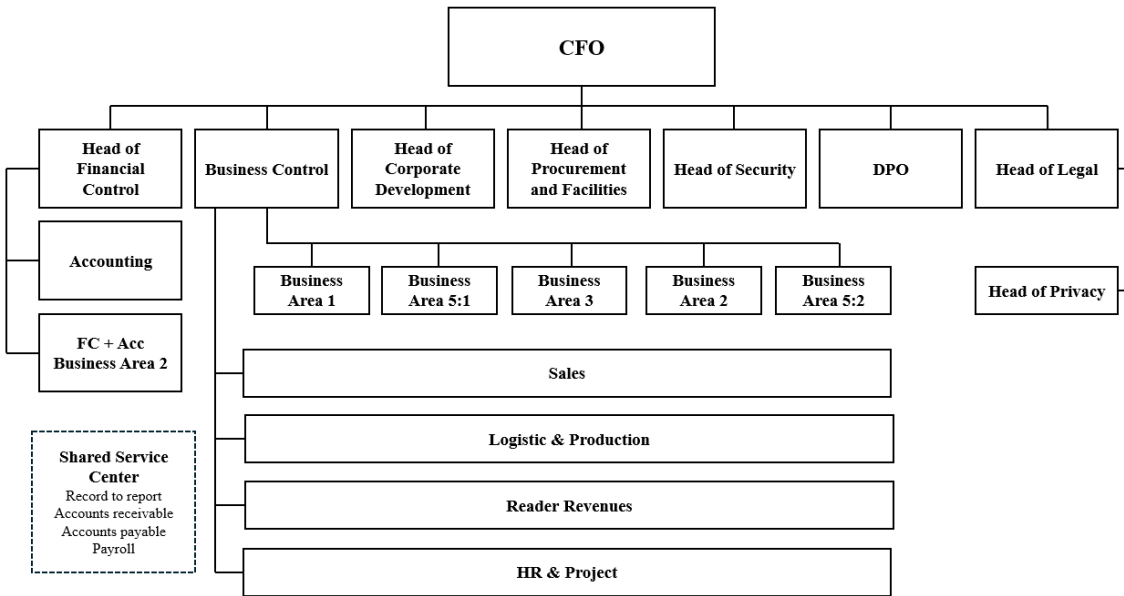
7.5. Appendix E – Categories and themes for coding



7.6. Appendix F – NewsCo organization



7.7. Appendix G – NewsCo finance organization



## 7.8. Appendix H – Quote table

| Interviewee ID     | Section | Context                              | Quote                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|--------------------|---------|--------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Tech 1             | 4.1.2   | Acquisitions and harmonization       | “If everyone works in the same system [...] we can do a lot more with the content, create new products or make sure we target content to the right readers or ads to the right readers and so on. That's why we should have everyone work in the same system. As we have grown so much and bought so many newspapers, it's a work in progress to ensure we get more and more onto these common systems.”                                                                                                                                       |
| Strategy and M&A 1 | 4.1.2   | Acquisitions driving technology      | “Of course, we also influence the technology [development] when we make acquisitions. For example, we bought a digital platform. [...]”                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| Tech 1             | 4.1.3   | Challenges with AI                   | “The big thing is what impact this has on the big picture. How will this change consumer behavior for example? Will people consume media in other ways? [...] What kind of impact does it have on business and our brands? Explosion of fake content. [...] There are a lot of parameters that are at play at the same time. It's not really that different from how it was when the internet came or when platforms started to have an impact or when the app economy took off. Then it is often quite difficult to value at an early stage.” |
| Strategy and M&A 2 | 4.2.1   | Description of Business Controllers  | “As a business controller you need to have a deep understanding of the numbers and for the area you are responsible for and the underlying drivers for different such as costs and revenues and how things are connected. [...] that you have the understanding and that you can do analyses and come to conclusions about various things.”                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| BC 7               | 4.2.1   | Description of Business Controllers  | “My responsibility is to keep the overall operational aspects connected to figures and so forth. My team is closely linked with the operations.” (BC 7)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| FC 5               | 4.2.1   | Description of Financial Controllers | “I follow up on the balance sheet. I focus less on the profit, that's what the Business Controller does. And putting together the annual report. Well, we have a lot of work in the closing of the accounts and putting everything together.”                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| BC 4               | 4.3.1   | The evolving technology              | “I would say the same thing, actually. It doesn't matter because I still think that a tool is a tool and the most important thing is to understand what is behind the numbers, and tools are just different ways to bring it out                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |

|        |       |                                                                        |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|--------|-------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|        |       |                                                                        | and present it, so it doesn't really make a difference, I would say. Maybe I become a bit more confident in the data I fetch so that there are no manual errors, but otherwise, I think like this. The most important thing for me is to understand what lies behind the numbers, and the tool is an aid.”                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| FC 2   | 4.3.1 | The importance of being involved in developing the evolving technology | “A good competence to have as a financial controller] Curious, that you want to be involved in changing things [...]. You take initiative. Dare to take place where you may not always be invited because here you have to make yourself seen so that there is an understanding that there is a need. [...] For example, system integrations or some kind of new systems that somewhere creates financial data. My experience is that IT runs itself, because it is an IT project and possibly that the business is involved [...] Then you have to be involved much earlier, before everything is actually built and then you may have to invite yourself to meetings.” |
| Tech 2 | 4.3.1 | Involvement in IT projects                                             | “One thing that I think NewsCo is very good at is making sure that people who join projects also follow projects forward. We almost never end up in any kind of customer-executor relationship. But when someone enters a project, those people are also involved both in the development process and in the end also present the project in different contexts. [...] And usually, it's people who either have a great interest or you just see that this is something that will have such a big impact that I need to be involved. IT is probably the two paths in projects.”                                                                                          |
| FC 1   | 4.3.2 | The strong trust in Excel                                              | “[...] we extract data from many systems and process it in Excel. The other systems are important as well. The group accounting system and the ledger. But Excel is a great tool. Managing everything you get out of the other systems there.”                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| FC 7   | 4.3.3 | Use of the BI tool                                                     | “To facilitate other processes, we have made reports for then we work with the annual report, so we can quickly read the numbers to make sure they are correct. We have built a report in the BI tool in the same way as it is set up in the annual report. Otherwise, you have to pick and there will be a lot of manual puzzling to understand what is included. [...] We also have a working capital report.”                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| BC 10  | 4.3.3 | AI aspirations                                                         | “[...] I feel very positive, and I hope it can free up time for other things, that we can avoid much of the manual tasks we do, that we can get help to do many analyses. Handling a lot of data and finding trends, that's something AI can do instead, and as I mentioned about writing comments or compiling data, a computer can do that instead, I don't need to sit and copy and paste. And then we'll have more time to do analyses that may impact business decisions, which is what we really want to do.”                                                                                                                                                      |
| BC 8   | 4.3.4 | AI and interactions                                                    | “I think that AI will be able to replace certain parts, especially when it comes to accounting and such things, if you think about reconciliations and others, like many                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |

|      |       |                     |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
|------|-------|---------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|      |       |                     | <p>in Financial control work with. But I don't think everything will be replaceable, but maybe I'm just being naive. But, I don't think so, I think it's still so important to have the human aspect, to be able to drive various types of projects and improvements and have that contact with the business and understanding, and to be able to make decisions from a broader perspective."</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| BC 7 | 4.3.4 | AI and interactions | <p>"I feel that it's [AI] super interesting, and I believe it can reshape the role because I think soft values and communication will be even more important going forward because data is quite rigid; there are no emotions in data. It can present something, but it can't always understand the operations and everything happening behind the scenes for one to comprehend the analysis or the data that an AI tool can generate. AI can probably also help a lot in removing low-hanging fruit, ranging from recurring questions, for example, an AI Finance bot could handle questions like 'what is the billing address' or 'what was the result for [Title X] in January 2023,' all these types of questions without even needing to start searching in any kind of Excel file. That would facilitate a lot, not just for me but for everyone, so that we can focus on other things rather than delivering those types of answers to the business."</p> |