Trust on Trial

A qualitative study of managers' development of trust in hybrid work settings

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Abstract

Hybrid work, the new way of working, is a growing subject amongst researchers. However, the concept of trust in this specific setting remains underexplored. Through a qualitative, cross-sectoral study, this thesis investigates how managers establish, maintain, and potentially re-establish trust towards their employees and how they deal with the potential risk of eroded trust. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a total of 12 experienced managers who have went through a shift in work environments before and after COVID-19. Drawing on the Integrative Model of Organisational Trust by Mayer et al. (1995), extended with the authors' concept 'carrier of trust', this research examines how trust is developed when physical presence is reduced. The study finds that while managers often claim that hybrid work has not inherently weakened trust and that trust is primarily built on-site, careful analysis of responses reveal that they simultaneously describe a range of compensatory actions they take in response to reduced physical presence. These actions, referred to as carriers of trust, include encouraging on-site presence, fostering informal interactions, maintaining continuous communication, and increasing oversight. Managers then adjust these actions depending on whether trust needs to be established, maintained, or re-established. By identifying and conceptualising these carriers, the study offers both theoretical and practical contributions. It provides a clearer understanding of how trust is actively managed in hybrid contexts and highlights the need for future research on the role of managerial bias, gender, and task measurability in shaping trust dynamics.

Keywords: Hybrid Work, Trust, Manager, Integrative Model of Organisational Trust, Carriers

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//Andrea and Sandra

Definitions

Table 1. Definitions

Concept	**Definition**
Trustee	The trusted party: in this thesis, this refers to the employees.
Trustor	A trusting party: in this thesis this refers to the manager.
Trust	A psychological state in which a trustor has positive expectations about a trustee's behaviour and willingly accepts vulnerability based on expected reliability under conditions of risk (Mayer et al., 1995; Rousseau et al., 1998).
Trustworthiness	The trustor's perception of the trustee's ability, benevolence, and integrity (Mayer et al., 1995).
Hybrid-work	A work model that combines work from home with traditional in-office work environments. Work from home (also referred to as remote work) is enabled by digital tools.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Alongside the development of technology and the digitalisation of many industries, there has been an increase in remote work (Chatterjee et al., 2022), reaching its peak in 2020 when COVID-19 forced employees from all over the world to rapidly transition from working in the office to working from home. This form of work has turned out to be attractive and everything indicates that it is here to stay, although in a modified form: working from home combined with working in office (ibid.). In the United States, for instance, work-from-home days increased from 7% in 2019 to as much as 60% in spring 2020 (Aksoy et. al, 2024). After the end of the lockdown, polls showed that at least half of workers wished to continue some level of remote work permanently (Becker et al., 2022). Today the statistics are even higher, as a recent Gallup survey shows: "*As of May 2024, 93% of all employees in remote-capable jobs prefer to work remotely at least some of their work week*" (Kemp, 2024, p.1). Not only in the US, but also in Sweden, there is increased demand for hybrid work models; nine out of ten Swedish managers' report that they experience pressure from their employees to have flexible working conditions (Adolfsson, 2024).

Not surprisingly, the economic, sociological, psychological, and other impacts of the monumental spread of remote- and hybrid work models have been extensively studied. Research results point to both promises and challenges of remote work models (Stavrova et al., 2023). (For an overview of research on the promises and challenges, see section 2.1.1.)

One of the key issues that emerge from the above-mentioned research is the question of trust in relation to hybrid work. Although trust in work environments has been a subject of research for quite some time, recent changes in work models have accelerated academic interest in this topic. There seems to be a certain polarization of scholarly views on trust in remote- and hybrid work environments. Many researchers argue that such environments may erode or even corrupt trust between manager and employees (e.g. Parker et al., 2020; Stavrova et al., 2023). However, this is contradicted by Östegård et al. (2025) who indicate that trust is not affected negatively by remote

settings. Evidently, the effects of remote- and hybrid work on trust and how managers overcome potential risks of trust-erosion seem to remain uncertain (Lis et al., 2021; Panteli et al., 2023).

Although trust is universally considered to be important, there is no universally accepted definition. However, most scholars, such as Rousseau et al. (1998), appear to agree with Mayer et al. (1995) that trust may be defined as a "*willingness to be vulnerable under conditions of risk and interdependence*" (p. 395). It is this understanding of trust that informs our study on how Swedish managers work to establish and maintain trust in hybrid work environments.

Kristi Woolsey, Associate Director at Boston Consulting Group, notes, *"A lot of people assume that because we know how to work together* [in the office]*, we know how to work apart, then we can do hybrid. But hybrid is a third way. It's incredibly difficult to do. This is the problem everyone will have to solve post Covid. It's going to be hard and it's going to be different"* (qtd. in Jacobs [2021] p. 1.). Her observation underscores the complexity of hybrid work, highlighting the need to examine how these shifts in work-environments have shaped managers' approaches to building and maintaining trust in employees. It also calls for an exploration of how managers address the potential risks of hybrid work, including trust-erosion.

While most studies on trust tend to focus on either traditional in-office (Sitkin & George, 2005; Lopez-Fresno & Savolainen, 2020) or entirely remote-work environments (Lilian, 2014; Badrinarayanan, 2024), this study will be focusing on the underexplored issue of trust in hybrid environments.

1.2 Aim and research question

In the organisational landscape of 2025, in a post-pandemic world, hybrid work has become the norm, and organisational trends show that trust in hybrid work settings can be challenging (Parker et al., 2020). More research is needed to understand how managers develop trust in this underexplored, third way of working. Thus, the primary aim of this thesis is to expand the current academic understanding of trust in organisations and investigate how managers establish and maintain trust towards their employees in hybrid work environments. Specifically, examining what actions they take while navigating the risk of trust-erosion.

The thesis will thus be exploring the following research question:

How do managers work to establish, maintain and, if necessary, re-establish trust in hybrid work environments?

To understand the fundamentals essential for trust to develop, the Integrative Model of Organisational trust by Mayer et al. (1995) will be employed. We will add the concept of "carriers" to the model to further explore what specific actions managers use when developing trust and how they address the potential risk of trust-erosion in hybrid work settings.

1.3 Delimitations

The research is limited to managers who have held employee responsibility before, during and after COVID-19, to ensure that they have experienced shifts in workplace dynamics and thus have accumulated considerable managerial experience. Importantly the research is limited to hybrid-work settings, that is, it does not include fully remote organisations or companies that have returned to only on-site work environments. Moreover, the companies should not have had hybrid-work policies prior to the pandemic. Furthermore, the authors have limited the study to Sweden to reduce the risk of cultural differences affecting the results. Lastly, the sample of interviewees is cross-sectoral to get a broader understanding of the subject and avoid cultural differences in sectors as well.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Existing research

2.1.1 Hybrid Work, its Promises and Challenges

Hybrid work is a work-model that combines working remotely with traditional in-office environments (Lauring & Jonasson, 2025). The transition toward hybrid work environments and evolving workplace policies has been under consideration for many organisations for years, accelerating in 2020 (Zamani et al., 2024). As a result, hybrid work has evolved as a third way of working, where physical presence and synchronicity are negotiable. Thus, new approaches are needed to make absence less disruptive and to adjust working-schedules to evolving needs (ibid.).

Existing research highlights both positive and negative implications of remote work, primarily focusing on the effects on wellbeing and efficiency (Stavrova et al., 2023). On the one hand, it can increase the feeling of isolation (Zoonen & Sivunen, 2021) but on the other it can decrease work-place bullying (Bollestad et al., 2022). Another crucial aspect of remote work is its impact on trust. There is a broad spectrum of positions on this issue and post-pandemic research is conflicting. Lis et al. (2021) acknowledge that remote work affects trust but argue that it remains uncertain whether this impact is positive or negative. Stavrova et al. (2023) on the other hand, suggest that employees' trust in their co-workers and supervisors is negatively impacted by a work-from-home setting. However, even more recent research assert that remote work does not impact trust negatively (Östergård et al., 2025). Such uncertainty about the impact of hybrid work-forms on trust underscores the need for further research and revisiting how trust itself is understood, defined and developed in organisational contexts.

2.1.2 Trust

Trust has long been a central concept to organisational theory with a considerable body of research. Early conceptualisations define trust as a psychological state in which a trustor has positive expectations about a trustee's behaviour and willingly accepts vulnerability based on expected reliability under conditions of risk (Mayer et al., 1995; Rousseau et al., 1998). Trustworthiness is assessed through the trustor's perception of the trustee's ability, benevolence and integrity, often referred to as the foundation of trust (Mayer et al., 1995). More recent research continues to rely on these foundational definitions, confirming their relevance in organisational trust research in both virtual (Norman et al., 2019) and remote work settings (Kähkönen, 2023).

2.1.3 Trust-Building in the Workplace

Trust is essential when establishing and maintaining workplace relationships, as it influences all aspects of professional interactions (Dirks & Jong, 2022). While trust-building is a collective responsibility, prior research consistently emphasises the pivotal role of managers in developing trust, with employee performance frequently cited as a key predictor of managerial trust (Lhaden & Dhimas, 2024). According to McAllister et al. (2006), trust increases with greater interpersonal familiarity, which in turn is shaped by shared experiences and frequent communication.

Managerial actions are central to effective trust development; regular, well-structured, and professionally executed meetings contribute to trust formation (Mishra & Morrissey, 1990; Lopez-Fresno & Savolainen, 2014). In addition, the use of appropriate control mechanisms, such as clear decision-making processes and standardised procedures, can enhance trust within the workplace (Sitkin & George, 2005). Moreover, previous research identifies additional key actions necessary for developing trust. For instance, social interactions with leaders have been shown to increase employee trust (Presbitero & Aruta, 2024). Hurley (2011) assert that communication remains central throughout this process and Lopez-Fresno and Savolainen (2020) similarly note that trust emerges through repeated interactions, information sharing, and the perceived demonstration of commitment, competence and integrity.

Face-to-face meetings are an essential tool for developing trust within organisations and Lopez-Fresno and Savolainen (2014) contend that virtual meetings are a less effective alternative. Meetings function not only as channels for communication and collaboration but also play an important role in knowledge exchange and relational development. Powell et al. (2004) highlight how face-to-face interactions foster socialisation, mutual respect, and trust. However, in hybrid work environments physical meetings and face-to-face interactions tend to be substantially reduced, so the establishment and maintenance of trust is considerably challenged (Dirks & Jong, 2022; Stavrova et al., 2023). Yet relatively little is known about how managers actively work to develop trust in these new environments, or how they navigate the potential risks of trust-erosion.

2.1.4 Specific Considerations for Trust-Building in Remote Contexts

While the foundation of trust – integrity, benevolence, and competence (Norman et al., 2019; Mayer et al., 1995) – is the same in remote and physical settings, research suggests that it is challenging for managers to develop trust in virtual environments, and that close ties are difficult to establish in the absence of physical proximity (Norman et al., 2019). However, if organisations mandate employees to return to the office, it may be perceived as a sign of the company's lack of trust in their ability to remain productive while working remotely (Stavrova et al., 2023).

While many trust-building actions persist when shifting from physical to remote work-settings, there are some significant differences in how trust is developed. Communication, social interaction, and perceived employee performance continue to play a role, but additional strategies are often required (Lilian, 2014; Badrinarayanan, 2024; Gamage et al., 2024). Research on virtual teams underscores that trust becomes increasingly problematic when interaction occurs primarily through electronic media without a shared social context (Sarker et al., 2011). Remote work disrupts the traditional informal exchanges that help foster trust, implying a need for new practices to compensate for the loss of in-person engagement, for instance, encouraging the use of cameras during virtual meetings (Badrinarayanan, 2024). In these contexts, managers must move beyond task-focused communication and intentionally create opportunities for informal interaction to sustain trust in hybrid work environments (ibid.).

Other recurring findings in the virtual work literature suggest that managers should strive to reduce uncertainty, pay attention to employee well-being, personalise communication, and utilise appropriate digital tools for specific tasks (Lilian, 2014; Badrinarayanan, 2024; Gamage et al., 2024). By applying such behavioural patterns and actions, managers can enhance trust and decrease process losses (Lilian, 2014; Norman et al., 2019). It is further shown that virtual managers who fail to promote communication often face difficulties in trust-development (Badrinarayanan, 2024). These findings provide valuable insights; however, they are drawn from studies in fully virtual and remote settings or conducted in crisis environments related to COVID-19.

2.2 Research gap

It is worth emphasising that while existing research on trust in the workplace has explored this concept in both traditional and virtual work environments, to the best of our knowledge, much of the focus has been either on fully virtual and remote teams, conducted before the large increase in remote work or on crisis-situations when remote work was abruptly forced due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Lilian, 2014; Lopez-Fresno & Savolainen, 2020; Gamage et al., 2024; Panteli et al., 2023). These studies have provided valuable insights regarding the importance of repeated interactions, communication, leadership behaviours, control measures and effective usage of digital tools in developing trust face-to-face or at a distance (Sitkin & George, 2005; Lilian, 2014; Lopez-Fresno & Savolainen, 2020; Badrinarayanan, 2024; Gamage et al., 2024). Yet, there

remains a notable gap in the literature examining what actions managers take to actively establish and maintain trust in hybrid work settings over time. It is particularly urgent to address the potential risk of trust-erosion when employees combine remote and on-site work. In hybrid settings, the dynamics of trust may differ from purely virtual, remote and traditional environments, especially given the increased importance to ensure that no employees get neglected (Krajčík et al., 2023). The thesis thus hopes to fill the gap by identifying managerial approaches that contribute to the establishment and preservation of trust in hybrid work environments.

3. Theoretical framework

To explore how managers establish and maintain trust toward employees and if, or how, they work to overcome the potential risk of trust-erosion in hybrid work settings, this thesis draws on the Integrative Model of Organisational Trust (IMOT) by Mayer et al. (1995).

3.1 The Integrative Model of Organisational Trust (IMOT)

The IMOT offers a foundational framework for understanding the conditions under which trust emerges (Mayer et al., 1995). It examines the core characteristics that form the foundation for trust. As demonstrated in studies like Norman et al. (2019), IMOT enables a nuanced and in-depth exploration of what trust entails, and the key elements on which it rests.

Designed to explain the development of trust, the IMOT defines trust as a function of perceived trustworthiness, which consists of three key characteristics that together form the foundation of trust: ability, benevolence, and integrity, that shape a trustor's (in this case the manager's) perception of the trustee (the employee) (Mayer et al., 1995). These three characteristics are important to examine in the context of hybrid work as trust is not only earned but evolves through successive and successful interactions (Norman et al., 2019).

The first characteristic, *ability*, refers to the extent that an employee is perceived as competent and capable of fulfilling a responsibility (Mater et al., 1995). In hybrid work, this includes task expertise but also self-direction. With limited oversight, managers may struggle to assess performance and evaluate if the employee solve tasks independently. Norman et al. (2019) thus

raise the question whether employee ability, in a hybrid environment, may also include the effective use of digital communication tools, beyond task execution.

Benevolence, the second characteristic, is understood as the extent to which an employee is believed to want to do good to the manager, indicating that the employee is motivated to offer support regardless of egocentric incentives. Benevolence is shown in social interactions, for example through the employees expressed interest and sensitivity to the managers personal and emotional needs. This is the most complex component as it takes the most time to form (Mayer et al., 1995). In hybrid work settings, where informal interactions are limited (Blomqvist et.al., 2024), benevolence-based trust is more difficult to discern and may be established even slower than in entirely physical settings.

Integrity involves the perception that employees act according to acceptable moral and ethical standards. If the manager perceives dishonesty, inconsistency or a mismatch of values, trust will be eroded or fail to develop (Mayer et al., 1995). In virtual settings, where oversight is less direct, Ford et al. (2017) indicate that managers may place greater emphasis on perceived internal commitment and alignment with organisational values.

These three characteristics are interdependent; a weakness in one may reduce overall trustworthiness (Mayer et al., 1995). Additionally, propensity to trust, an individual's general willingness to trust others, without prior information, plays a critical role. High propensity to trust can lead to faster delegation and collaboration, while low propensity may delay trust, even in supportive conditions. In organisations, a manager's propensity to trust, especially early in the relationship, influence how much autonomy is initially granted to employees (ibid.).

Lastly, perceived risk and risk taking is central to trust. Trust is only relevant when there's vulnerability, when one party must rely on another despite the possibility of being let down (Mayer et al., 1995). In hybrid work, this means, among other things, granting autonomy despite limited supervision (Zamani et al., 2024). Ultimately, the outcome of the IMOT process determines the extent to which a manager trusts their employees. This outcome, positive or negative, shapes future trust by influencing perceptions of ability, benevolence, and integrity, creating a feedback loop within the model (figure 3.1):

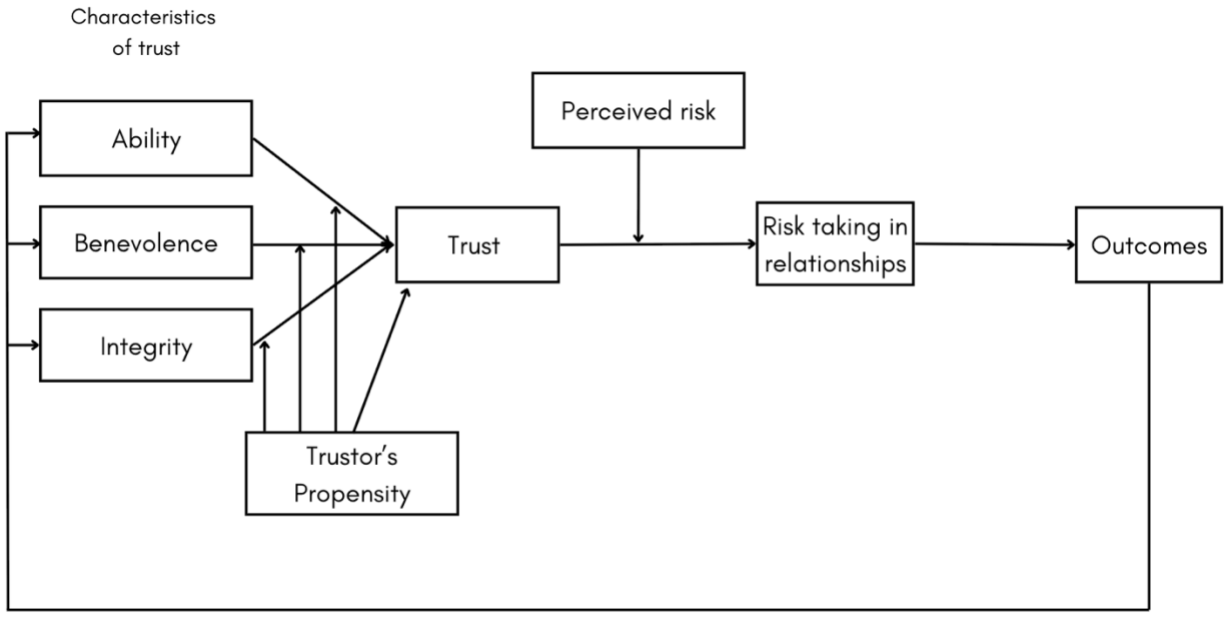


Figure 3.1: Integrative model of Organisational Trust (Mayer et al., 1995). Reproduction by Fjellestad & Låftman, 2025

3.2 Theory Relevance and Critiques

The IMOT provides a relevant framework for analysing the development of trust and can be used to examine how managers overcome the potential risk of trust-erosion in hybrid settings. The models three characteristics help conceptualise the foundational conditions that build the basis for manager's trust in employees, also when face-to-face interaction and direct oversight is limited.

Given that the IMOT is 30 years old and constructed prior to the widespread mode of working in remote or hybrid environments, it might be tempting to question its relevance. However, modern studies have continued to build upon the IMOT framework without suggesting it has become outdated or irrelevant (Schweitzer et al., 2018; Long, 2021; Lhaden & Dimas, 2024). IMOT has also been applied in virtual-work research (Norman et al., 2019). Recent applications of the model highlight that trust is often formed through evaluations of how well a trustee performs assigned tasks (Schweitzer et al., 2018) and the core constructs of the IMOT, particularly the dimensions of ability, benevolence, and integrity, continue to play a significant role in contemporary organisational trust research (Kähkönen, 2023). Together, the components offer a

structured way to understand how managers valuate trustworthiness in a context shaped by distance, autonomy, and reduced visibility.

While the model offers a solid structure to evaluate the basis of trust, it falls short in identifying the specific behaviours or actions by which trust can be cultivated over time. This limitation has been acknowledged by the authors themselves (Mayer et al., 1995), who highlight the need for further research on the processes and actions that actively develop trust. To address this limitation, we introduce the concept 'carriers of trust', by which we mean the actions managers use to develop trust. The concept is based on insights from previous research on managerial trust-building; however, this thesis seeks to more concretely identify these carriers in hybrid work settings. This, to understand how managers establish and maintain trust, as well as overcome the potential risk of trust-erosion in these settings, when trust is put on trial. The carriers are implemented after the first perception of trust is assessed (outcome) and then influences the entire trust-development process as it is updated over time, in a loop, see figure 3.2. When improvements in ability, benevolence, or integrity are needed, different carriers are employed accordingly. Likewise, the absence of a specific carrier can undermine these trust characteristics, explaining the cyclical nature of the model.

Previous research has emphasised trust *development* as a continuous, evolving process (Mayer et al., 1995; Hurley, 2011). This thesis examines that process in full, with a focus on its different stages: establishing trust with a new employee, maintaining it over time, and responding if trust erodes and must be re-established.

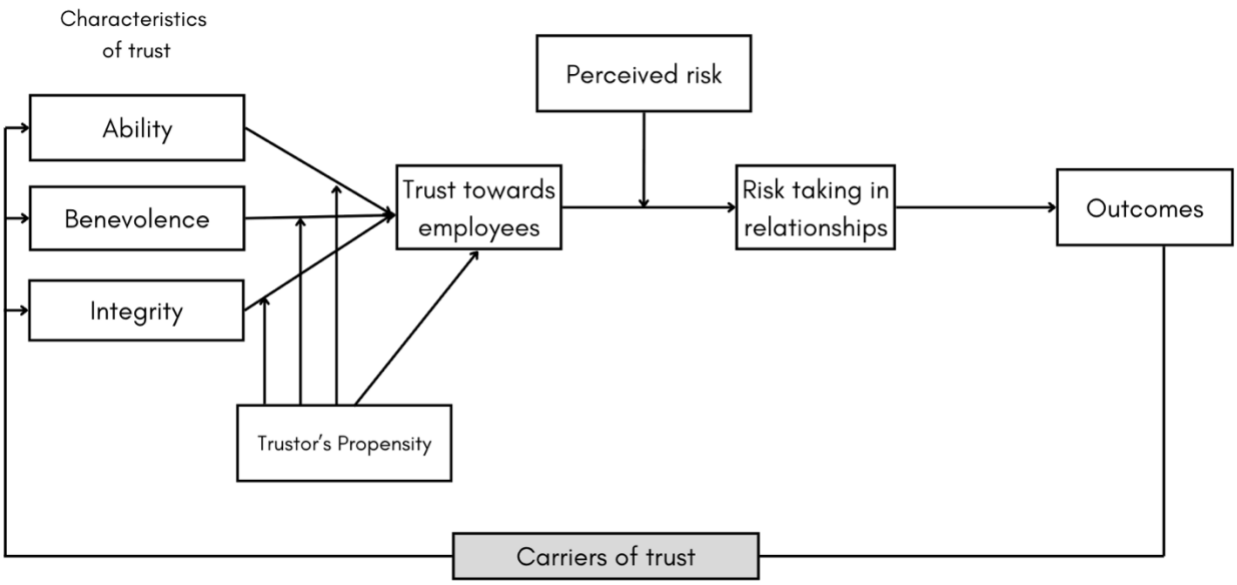


Figure 3.2: Integrative model of Organisational Trust (Mayer et al., 1995) modified by Fjellestad & Låftman, 2025

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Research Approach and Philosophy

The research of this thesis is carried out by using an abductive approach, that is, moving back and forth between deduction and induction (Saunders et al., 2019). This approach was chosen for its flexibility in exploring different aspects of the research. The abductive approach allows for adjustments and adaptations depending on the results of interviews. By using this approach, we could adapt our understanding of the data as new themes emerge during the research process. These emerging insights were then used to refine and expand the theoretical framework, particularly by adding the aspect of carriers of trust.

Furthermore, this research is based on the interpretive paradigm which focuses on understanding the fundamental meanings attached to organisational life and making sense of the world around us (Saunders et al., 2019). As this thesis aims to understand and explain how hybrid work has challenged the establishment and maintenance of trust, this paradigm is well suited. This approach allows for an in-depth exploration of the subjective experiences and perceptions of managers in hybrid work environments. Rather than looking for objective truths, the

interpretivist paradigm mean that reality is shaped by the individual meanings and interpretations people assign to their interactions and experiences (ibid.). In the context of this research, the paradigm helps us understand the different ways trust is established and maintained over time in hybrid work settings. By focusing on the experiences of participants, the interpretivist approach gives us valuable insights into how trust evolves in hybrid environments.

4.2 Research Design

4.2.1 Qualitative Research Design

The study relied on qualitative interviews with managers who have been responsible for personnel throughout the pre-, during, and post-COVID-19 pandemic periods. The interviews aimed to explore if, and how, managers work to establish and maintain trust in employees while in a hybrid-work setting. A qualitative research design was selected as it is particularly effective in uncovering the underlying motivations and thought processes behind managers' views on trust in their employees (Saunders et al., 2019). As the study focuses on understanding the subjective experiences of managers in establishing and maintaining trust, this approach enabled a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the matter compared to a quantitative approach.

However, the use of qualitative interviews as the primary data source entails certain limitations. Participants may be unwilling or unable to discuss sensitive or socially undesirable behaviours, which could leave important dimensions of workplace trust unexplored (Bell et al., 2019). We were aware of this potential challenge and thus paid special attention to deviant answers or avoidances of answering follow-up questions.

4.2.2 Interview Design

The interviews were conducted individually and followed a non-standardised, semi-structured format, with a combination of questions prepared in advance, and spontaneous follow-up questions to gain a deeper understanding of participants' experiences and perspectives (Saunders et al., 2019). A combination of close-ended (question 1-4) and open-ended questions (question 5-13) were asked, see Appendix 1. The close-ended questions helped establish the interviewee's background, and the open-ended were meant to trigger a deeper and more detailed conversation around the research question. The open-ended questions were primarily constructed to help guide the interviews, leaving room for the conversations to evolve around the responses of the

interviewees. This method provided flexibility and adaptability and was well suited for understanding the nature of manager's view on trust. However, it also required special interview skills, such as attentive listening, remaining present, withholding personal bias, and allowing participants space to develop their responses while carefully examining their deeper meaning. In reviewing the collected material, we assessed if we lived up to these standards and found that they were met.

4.3 Data Collection

4.3.1 Sample Selection

The interviewees were carefully selected for the aim of this thesis. First, they were all managers over 50 years of age (the average age being 55) who all experienced a managerial post-pandemic shift, moving from fully physical presence to hybrid work settings. One manager had worked in a manager's position for 7 years, one for 29, but the average period of managerial experience was close to 19 years. Moreover, all interviewees hold personnel-responsibility. As the thesis aims to get a cross-sectoral perspective on trust-building, managers from various sectors were chosen, allowing for a possibility to identify patterns and anomalies in their relation to trust. To obtain the sample, a combination of the purposeful sampling and snowball sampling was utilised (Saunders et al., 2019). The first interviewees were purposefully chosen from the authors' network, based on how they match the requirements. These interviewees were then asked to refer us to other relevant individuals in sectors or industries other than their own, resulting in 10 out of 12 respondents being managers over managers. When reaching out to the interviewees, the primary tool was email. (See Appendix 2 for email example). Altogether around 20 potential interviewees were contacted, of which 12 were finally interviewed, whereafter the authors found that saturation had been achieved, meaning more data would not generate additional insights (Bell et al., 2019). The interviewees were equally distributed between male and female participants. To maintain anonymity, the specific companies will not be named.

Sex	(~) Years in a managerial position	Sector	Code
Female	22	Non-profit	F22-non-profit
Male	24	Security	M24-security
Male	11	Telecom	M11-telecom
Male	26	Banking	M26-banking
Female	20	Consulting/law	F20-consulting/law
Female	20	Non-profit	F20-non-profit
Female	15	Tools	F15-tools
Female	14	Banking	F14-banking
Male	18	Real estate	M18-real-estate
Male	7	Care and welfare	M7-care-and-welfare
Female	29	Financial	F30-financial
Male	19	Facilities/law	M19-facilities/law

Table: 4.1 Respondents

4.3.2 Interview Process

The interviews were conducted digitally through video-meetings on Teams. This approach was best suited as interviewees and researchers were located at different places. While face-to-face interviews can increase the richness of the interaction, online interviews were more convenient for both parties. A brief overview of the research background, along with information regarding the anonymity of the interviews, was provided as an introduction. Following this, the questions and discussions took place. The interviews facilitated open discussions centred around trust, hybrid work, and the overall actions employed in evolving work environments. Nonetheless, the conversations remained aligned with the central goals of the research. All interviews were recorded using the "Voice Memo" application and were subsequently transcribed using Teams AI transcription tool. Consent to record and transcribe was obtained from all interviewees. The duration of the interviews ranged from 17:49 to 41:06 (see Appendix 3). The varying duration of the interviews depended on the depth and detail of the participants' responses, with those expressing stronger opinions on the subject generally resulting in longer interviews.

4.4 Thematic Analysis

A thematic approach was used to identify, organise and interpret themes and patterns across the sectors (Saunders et al., 2019). Both the recorded and transcribed material was reviewed several times. Aligning with the abductive approach of this study, the thematic approach allowed us to make sense of the data and to detect meaningful themes. The analysis was then conducted manually, identifying codes and grouping them together to form broader themes based on what was repeated by multiple managers in different interviews. The first coding of empirics generated around 25 first-order themes (see Appendix 4), later reduced into 7 second-order themes, in turn resulting in two aggregate dimensions. The IMOT describes the characteristics that need to be in place for trust to develop and these were found widely spread in all second-order themes, and thus all were integrated within the aggregated dimensions. To avoid the risk of confusion by the alternative spider-web-like visual (Appendix 5), for the sake of clarity and readability, we modify the results and present them in a more readable format below in Figure 4.1. The thematic approach allowed us to interpret the underlying meaning and patterns in our qualitative data.

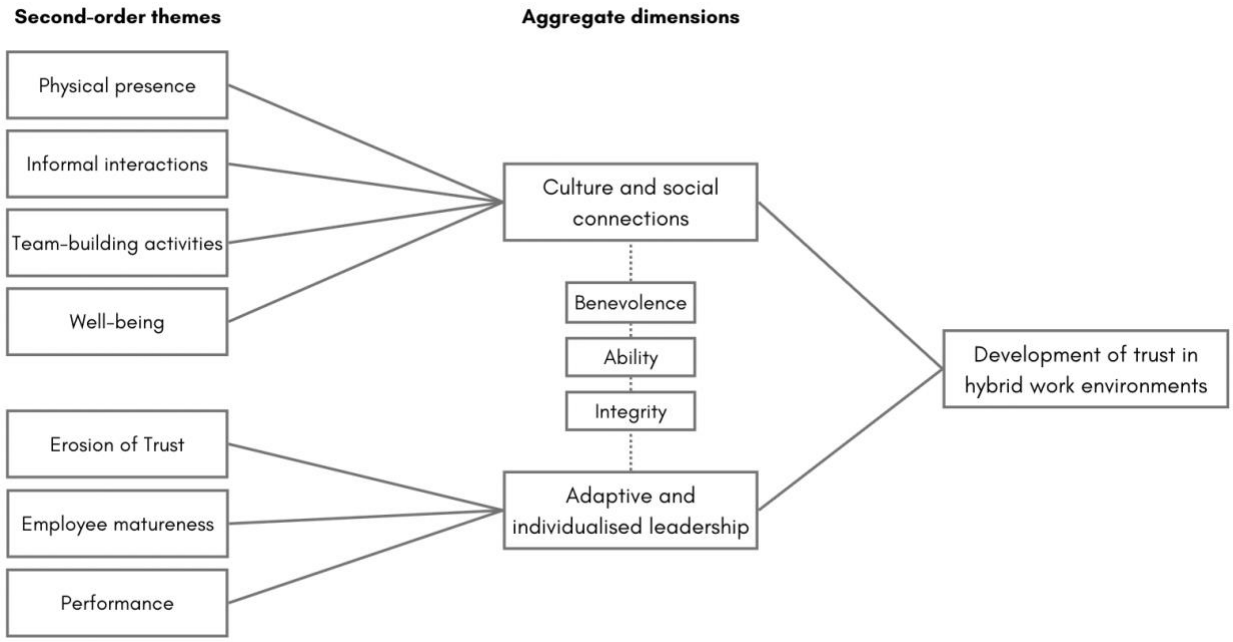


Figure 4.1: Results of Thematic Analysis

4.5 Securing Research Quality

In line with the interpretive paradigm and the qualitative nature of this study, research quality was assessed using the concepts of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. These criteria are considered more appropriate than traditional measures of reliability and validity, as they better align with the view that reality is socially constructed and multifaceted (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Saunders et al., 2019).

Credibility was enhanced through semi-structured interviews that allowed for clarification and deeper exploration, combined with triangulation across participants from diverse sectors and organisational contexts to reduce bias and capture multiple perspectives. Given the sensitive nature of discussing trust, it is recognised that some respondents may have been cautious in their responses. However, with the anonymity of the participants, this potential bias is reduced. Transferability was supported through rich, contextual descriptions of participants' backgrounds, sectors, and organisational environments. Detailed reporting enables readers to assess the relevance of the findings for other hybrid work contexts. Dependability was enhanced by maintaining a transparent and systematic approach to data collection, including keeping research journals to document earlier modifications and track ongoing progress. Additionally, a supervisor and members of a supervisor group continuously followed up on the drafts and development of the thesis. To promote confirmability, self-reflexivity was practiced throughout the research process, with researchers continually reflecting on their own assumptions and potential biases. Moreover, the researchers critically considered how the sensitivity of the topic might have influenced the participants willingness to fully disclose their experiences. To reduce this risk, broad questions were asked, and participants could answer freely and at their own comfort level. Additionally, data was reviewed and analysed individually before the authors collaboratively discussed interpretations and reached a common understanding.

4.6 Ethical considerations

During the interview process, sensitive participant data was collected. To protect privacy, all interviewees and organisations were anonymised. Participants signed a consent-form confirming that only, gender, age, managerial experience and sector information would be used. They were also informed of their right to skip questions or withdraw from the study. A brief overview of the

thesis purpose was provided prior to participation. All data collection adhered to the GDPR guidelines of the Stockholm School of Economics and was deleted from the authors' devices after completion.

4.7 Usage of Artificial Intelligence

To enhance efficiency and precision, Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools were utilized during the process. These tools were used as supplementary aids, with all critical analysis, interpretation, and argumentation conducted by the authors. ChatGPT was used with the purpose of improving the academic language, enabling precise and well-structured writing. Furthermore, during the Teams interviews the AI transcription tool was used directly in the app. The interviews were also recorded and double-checked afterwards to assure that the transcribed texts captured the original essence without major mistakes.

5. Empirics

This section presents the empirical results from the 12 interviews that have been conducted for the purpose of providing a foundation for answering the research question.

5.1 Empirical overview

When investigating how managers establish and maintain trust, it is crucial to understand how they perceive trust. The interviewed managers' understanding of trust is strikingly similar to the definition used in this thesis. The general idea is that trust is a multifaceted concept grounded in credibility, responsibility and the quality of relationships. It involves believing that others will fulfil their commitments and act with honesty and transparency, without the need for constant oversight. For all interviewed managers, trust is important and many of them describe trust as the default, unless the employee proves otherwise. However, since 2020, managers face a new way of working and can no longer rely on the full physical presence that previously characterised their managerial experience, and thus, we wanted to further understand if the default viewpoint has altered.

Predominantly, our results found that managers declare that they trust their employees when they work from home.

"We have high trust in the ones working from home - no issues with underperformance, some tasks that require a lot of concentration are even better fitted for the environment at home." - F20-consulting/law

"I have high trust towards my employees, and the baseline is that I trust them 100% when working remotely, no news is good news." - M7-care-and-welfare

Still, a few managers expressed concerns about reduced productivity at home, particularly due to distractions. Intriguingly, these concerns were raised only by male respondents:

"Some I can trust to 100%, some tend to slack. It is clear when people who 'work' from home do not work. Fridays are especially an issue, when people take an 'early weekend', and you don't get an answer to your emails or teams calls - they 'check out'." - M24-security

"I have some issues with one employee who continually wants to work remotely, and he does not pick up when he is at home and thereby, I do not trust him but am forced to do so." - M18-real-estate

One last trend regarding the managers perceived trust in their employees is that multiple interviewees claimed that the trust they have in their employees is stronger than what they believe is the case in other teams. These beliefs were also voiced only by men.

"*I am convinced that managers in other departments have issues with employees cheating and escaping tasks and thereby experience trust issues.*" - M19-facilities/law

"*I think I have higher trust in them* [his employees] *than many other managers in the organisation.*" - M26-banking

The following sections are presented in accordance with our second-order themes and aggregate dimensions shown in Figure 4.1. We hope this allows for a better understanding of how managers work to establish and maintain trust in hybrid work settings, and the challenges this entails.

5.2 Culture and Social Connections

The responses show that all interviewees find relationships and personal connections with their employees to be essential for an organisation and its culture. A general trend is that managers tend to try hard to create good culture and connections, regardless of if the efforts are online or on-site. However, they suggest that this is more difficult in hybrid work environments.

5.2.1 Physical Presence

Most managers state that they believe that trust is created primarily on-site; while being online, they are not actively working on establishing it. Several respondents emphasised that trust is correlated with real relationships, and that such relationships require physical presence, as it enables spontaneous interactions and deeper personal connections. Managers noted that moments like casual check-ins and shared whiteboard sessions – essential for fostering a trusting environment – are difficult to replicate digitally.

"*100% digital makes it difficult to build relationships. It was more difficult during Covid, but as we now meet some days a week, it works fine.* (...) *I believe that in a way collaboration and trust are built when we meet in person*." - F22-non-profit

"I have more check-ins with them [employees working remote] *because, unlike the others,* [the ones on-site] *I can't sense how they're feeling just by seeing them around."* - M26-banking

"But overall, this [working] *is harder when you don't see each other. With people who are never at the office, you start thinking, 'For fucks sake, do you even want to work here?'*" - M24-security

Furthermore, the data indicates that managers employ various strategies to encourage employees to return to the office, inspiring a different and often more dynamic social and collaborative environment among colleagues. Some examples of such "carrot" strategies are new offices or special benefits, like the opportunity to take remote days connected to vacation. Some managers claim that frequent on-site appearances demonstrate one's dedication and commitment to the workplace. This, in turn, enhances their perception of the employees, and thereby fosters greater trust.

"*Use carrots, find the right incentives and good reasons for people to want to come in* (...). *If it feels more enjoyable to come into the office, people show up and it creates a better dynamic, you see more people around.*" - M11-telecom

5.2.2 Informal Interactions

Regardless of whether the managers have employees working from home, other cities or in the office, most of them make an effort to create an environment in which values are in line and relationships can grow. This is often done through virtual "fikas", spontaneous lunches when on-site or more frequent check-ins, where topics other than work can be discussed.

"*I arrange a virtual 'fika'.*" - F15-tools

"It's important to 'check in,' especially, for example, when you're eating together in the office." - F20-consulting/law

However, informal interactions do not come as naturally while remote.

"*A challenge with remote work is the loss of culture, regular small talk and general check-ins by the coffee machine."* - M26-banking

Several managers also stated that personal connections, created in informal settings, are strongly correlated with trust. Even if no specific question was asked about trust and personal connections, this was brought up by at least four respondents.

"Trust is the bottom-line/a fundament for all relationships, both professional and personal." - F30-financial

"Trust is connected to a deeper relationship, if I trust someone, I am willing to walk the extra mile for them." - F14-banking

5.2.3 Team-building activities

When managers discussed how they build relationships and foster a strong culture, a common theme was the use of team-building activities. Most managers said that they organise various forms of relationship-building initiatives.

"*We're actually pretty good at organising evening activities, just within the group. It could be hitting a bucket of golf balls, playing some pool, or just going out for dinner together. We do that probably about once every quarter.*" - M18-real-estate

"We have things like Christmas parties or holiday activities where we do some team activities, maybe have a glass of wine at the same time and play some games (...)*. Sometimes we celebrate someone turning 50 and organise a few activities around that too."* - F14-banking

In contrast to the examples above, a couple of interviewees noted that while there is frequent discussion about building community and encouraging shared activities, it remains uncertain to what extent employees are genuinely committed to these efforts. While some managers express the importance of engaging in activities outside of work, others suggest that such initiatives may be less essential, or just not desired.

"*I know there's talk about building communities and such, but in the end, I'm not sure how dedicated people really are* (...)*. It's* [AW's] *not really something I'm actively pushing right now.*" - F15-tools

Some also recognised that an absence of shared activities could negatively impact cohesion, connection, and overall team dynamics.

"Of course, it's understandable [not attending AWs] *if someone has young children, but even younger people today don't seem as interested in socialising in the same way. I feel that the sense of togetherness has disappeared."* - F24-security

5.2.4 Well-being

A recurring challenge of hybrid work is that the managers feel that they have a more difficult time keeping track of how their employees are feeling. This makes it difficult for them to assess whether a given employee has the right workload or if he/she is working too much, which in turn affects the relationship with the employee.

"I cannot see that my employees do not "over-work" when they are remote (...) *More need for awareness and vigilance."* - F20-non-profit

"We don't see people in the same way. We don't physically see the employees — we don't see how they're doing."- M26-banking

Managers clearly care about the well-being of their employees, but what about the other way around? When asked if they feel that their employees care about their well-being and their (the managers') workload most managers feel that they do.

"My employees really do care about my well-being; we all are very open and vulnerable towards each other." - F14-banking

Only two respondents feel the opposite. These individuals are men, and the same ones who generally express a less positive attitude toward remote work.

"My employees do not care about me or my well-being." - M18-real-estate

"They do not care about how I do." - M24-security

5.3 Adaptive and Individualised Leadership

Many interviewees expressed the importance of adopting their leadership to the situation and the individual. This is done based on employee behaviour, demonstrated performance, and the duration of their working relationship. Individualised leadership is particularly called for when trust becomes an issue.

5.3.1 Erosion of Trust

Overall, trust-building in hybrid settings is often approached reactively rather than proactively, with managers focusing on establishing, or re-establishing, trust primarily after problems emerge. Trust is seen as the default attitude, and actions are taken when a deviation from the default arises. Trust re-establishing measures include individual conversations with the employees, stricter demand for on-site presence and higher control.

"*If I have employees who don't manage to work well from home, do other things or have a hard time focusing, they need to come into the office more often.*" - F20-non-profit

"*If we see that someone doesn't work when remote, and that we can't reach them, we take action thereafter.*" - M7-care-and-welfare

Virtually, all managers express concern that the lack of informal, in-person contact makes it harder to maintain a sense of control and connection, in turn affecting their ability to assess employee engagement and wellbeing, which ultimately has a negative impact on trust. When people are rarely seen, trust can erode even without concrete proof of underperformance.

"*When someone doesn't deliver, is absent a lot, and so on, trust starts to fade. That's when you need to start setting rules. I talk to the person first, tell them to be at the office on certain days at certain times. Then I am clearer about deadlines, informing that this needs to be done on this day, with this level of quality* (...)*."* - F14-banking

5.3.2 Employee Matureness

At least 25% of the managers explicitly emphasise the importance of physical presence at the office for newly hired employees, as it facilitates integration into the team and exposure to the organisational culture. The remaining 75% hint at this or signal its importance in indirect ways. In this initial phase, the absence of an established trust relationship makes in-person interactions particularly valuable.

"New employees must be present on-site much more in the beginning to build personal relationships." - F14-banking

"Most difficult to have new employees working remotely, it takes a longer time for them to get to know the organisation, the colleagues and tasks. Thus, it is more important that they are present." - F30-financial

Moreover, when you know the person better and can evaluate their ability and character, the interviewed managers emphasize that being in the office full time becomes less important.

5.3.3 Performance

Multiple interviewees, who have employees with clearly measurable roles, say that trust is easy to maintain in hybrid settings, as the managers can track if the employees do what they should.

"A lot of our work is based on scheduled time, like booked activities, visits or phone calls. So, I don't really see that [lack of trust that employees do what they should] *as a problem* (...)*. Much of what we do is measurable. We don't track individual work-from-home days specifically, but overall, we can see how much someone has produced or how many visits they've had, and so on."* - M7-care-and-welfare

"*As the function's results are so measurable, you can't get away with not doing what you should even if you are at home."* **-** F22-non-profit

Another clear trend emerging from the interviews is that managers want to have more regular check-ups and follow-up meetings when employees work remotely. This is especially true for roles in which work results are less measurable, but some managers with employees in measurable roles also agree.

"*As people go remote, we have more follow-ups"* - M24-security

"*I feel like we are harsher on the ones working from home a lot* (...)*. We have more strict communication and follow-ups on the ones working from home*" - M26-banking

Additionally, a pattern emerged concerning whether managers viewed employees as competent enough to be working remotely. Most trusted their employees to work effectively, though some expressed concern about whether they were focused on the right tasks. While none found their employees failing to work entirely, some managers noted that the office-environment allows for greater oversight and increased accountability. Although, underperformance existed on-site, it appeared to increase in remote settings.

"*We have none that does not work at all, but you can be unsure if they work with the correct things or what they should. However, the only real issue we have had with someone not working happens at the office as well, but as we can control it more here, it takes off more when that person is at home"*. - F22-non-profit

"The ones who have a difficult time performing on-site have an even harder time doing so online (...)*. It takes longer to notice that someone has a difficulty within a role when they are working*

from home. I believe there is some kind of correlation between having a difficult time performing and stepping back." - F14-banking

6. Analysis and Discussion

The analysis explores key fundamentals that underpin trust-development and examines how hybrid work settings affect them. Moreover, with the central modification to the IMOT, carriers of trust in hybrid settings are identified, to offer an understanding of in what ways trust is developed, based on the essential underlying characteristics.

6.1 Fundamentals of Trust

Most managers report that hybrid work has not inherently weakened trust, aligning with Östegård et al. (2025), and contradicting Stavrova et al., (2023). However, a vast majority find it easier to assess employees' ability when they observe them on-site. F22-non-profit and F14-banking note that individuals who struggle to perform remotely often exhibit similar challenges in the office, suggesting perceptions of ability are not significantly affected by hybrid settings. However, the data implies that performance assessments become more complex in hybrid environments due to reduced visibility. While few report a complete loss of perceived ability, some express concerns about whether employees are focusing on the right tasks. Remote work is thus viewed as a risk, though this is partly mitigated in roles with measurable outcomes. Several respondents suggest that performance influences their trust in the employees, consistent with Lhaden & Dhimas' findings (2024). The empirical data also indicates that some managers (especially M18-real-estate and M24-security), the same ones that overall had a more sceptical attitude towards trust, perceive reduced availability among remote employees, which again highlights the risk associated with hybrid work. Thus, as Norman et al. (2019) indicate, ability in hybrid work includes not just task competence, but also digital visibility, responsiveness and communication behaviour.

When evaluating benevolence, interviewee responses are intended to reflect the extent to which managers perceive the employee to have positive intentions towards them and the organisation (Mayer et al., 1995). The respondents were divided in their perceptions; many stated that their employees care about their well-being and workload, while others did not feel that this was the

case. Notably, the respondents who perceived a lack of benevolence from the employee were men, specifically the two most sceptical ones. Benevolence is inherently the slowest trust component to establish (Mayer et al., 1995) and several interviewees confirmed that deeper relationships take time to establish and is further hindered in hybrid settings due to fewer informal interactions. However, even though benevolence might be weakened in hybrid work, the lack thereof does not seem to cause a total loss of trust.

According to Mayer et al. (1995) and Powell et al. (2004), perceived integrity is especially important in the early stages of trust-establishment. However, the respondents suggest that in hybrid work environments, integrity, which they link to shared values and organisational culture, can take longer and is more difficult to establish. While this does not contradict existing theory, it highlights an aspect the model does not explicitly address: the influence of work context on the timing of trust development. That said, the data does not offer sufficient evidence to determine whether this delay is influenced by industry or occupation. For example, respondents in the legal sector did not report this challenge, likely because shared values in their work are largely shaped by established regulatory frameworks.

The reason why some managers (e.g. M18-real-estate and M24-security) have a more sceptical attitude towards trusting their employees could be explained by personal biases or individual opinions about remote work, evident in several statements from these managers. However, it could also be explained by a lower propensity to trust from the start, something that impacts the entire trust relationship (Mayer et al., 1995). While the small sample does not allow for firm conclusions, there is an indication that male managers show a lower trust propensity. This raises the question of whether the two special cases in our sample reflect anomalies in trust attitudes, or if they simply speak more openly, suggesting less self-censorship or greater willingness to express distrust in a context where trust is generally expected. Regardless, most managers adopt trust as the default, indicating an overall high propensity to trust. Thus, the gender-related propensity to express distrust, especially when trust is expected, is a topic worth further research.

Sub-conclusion: Managers tend to view trust as a default, primarily established through on-site presence. In hybrid settings, all three characteristics, ability, benevolence and integrity, take longer to assess, especially the latter two, which delays detection of trust-erosion. Some

managers continue to trust their employees despite low perceived benevolence, suggesting that ability and integrity may be more decisive. The findings indicate that no clear patterns emerge by sector or experience. Overall, trust appears highly individualised, underscoring the importance of carriers of trust in hybrid work settings.

6.2 Carriers of Trust

We refer to *carriers of trust* as the concrete actions managers employ to establish, maintain and, when needed, re-establish trust in hybrid settings. Framing them as carriers highlights their role in shaping the core characteristics of trust when direct oversight and informal contact may be limited. Figure 6.1 illustrates how the carriers identified in this study are connected to the trust characteristics. The overlapping lines are intentional and reflect our finding that carriers often relate to multiple characteristics at once. For this reason, the following section is structured by carriers and the timeline of the trust-relationship, not by individual characteristics.

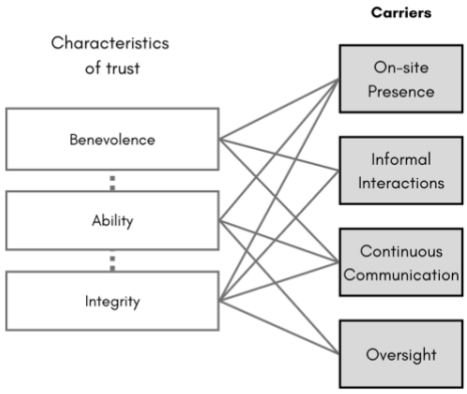


Figure 6.1: The interconnected relationship between characteristics of trust and carriers of trust, by Fjellestad & Låftman, 2025

The empirical data implies that physical interactions facilitate the development of trust and building of relationships, in alignment with the findings of Powell et al. (2004) and Norman et al. (2019). As a result, even managers who express trust in their remote-working employees often articulate a preference for partial on-site presence during the week.

The empirical findings support Lopez-Fresno & Savolainen's (2020) suggestion that trust develops over time. Establishment of trust in new employees often begins with cautious

oversight and a preference for physical presence. This may be attributed to the fact that all interviewees began their managerial roles in fully on-site settings, which shaped their expectations and preferences regarding workplace presence. In the early stages of the relationship, the managers perceived trustworthiness of the employee has not fully been established. As employees prove themselves, and familiarity grow, managers become more comfortable extending autonomy and allowing remote work. This gradual shift from monitoring to trusting aligns with the Integrative Model's view that trust develops through accumulated positive experiences and demonstrated trustworthiness.

The data further indicates that trust is maintained through informal interactions. Managers often value moments like shared lunches, coffee breaks, and casual check-ins for fostering culture and trust. These actions not only cultivate professional relationships but also allow managers to observe behaviours that signal benevolence which in turn strengthens interpersonal trust (Mayer et al., 1995). Furthermore, repeated informal engagement provides managers with cues related to integrity, such as consistency in behaviour and alignment between words and actions. However, many managers note a decline in these interactions with remote work, which Badrinarayanan (2024) suggest can hinder relationship-building and Mishra and Morrissey (1990) imply can delay cultivation of trust. To address this, some managers go beyond task-oriented approaches and actively organise in-person team activities, which function as trust-carriers to establish stronger interpersonal connections.

In addition to informal interactions, continuous communication emerges as a critical carrier for maintaining trust in hybrid environments. We find that managers value regular meetings and continuous communication through emails and teams-messages for developing trust and personal connections, as well as the overall evaluation of employee trustworthiness, just as McAllister et al. (2006) suggest. Furthermore, the empirical findings reveal that many managers (e.g., M24-security and M26-banking) increase meeting frequency and overall communication when employees work remotely, supporting Hurley's (2011) findings on fully remote environments. By increasing communication, managers can evaluate the ability of their employees even if they are not physically together, which becomes especially important in roles in which performance is less measurable.

The data further highlights various strategies employed by managers to re-establish trust when it has eroded to the point of a total loss, typically due to perceived lack of either integrity or ability. When trust is lost, managers respond by increasing oversight through more frequent check-ups and setting clearer deadlines, particularly when an employee's perceived ability is in question or when deliverables are not met. When the employee's integrity is questioned, strategies aimed at increasing physical presence and strengthening organisational culture are commonly used to reinforce expectations and re-establish alignment with shared values, utilising the same carriers employed during the initial establishment of trust. When appropriately implemented, such control mechanisms can create greater trust (Sitkin & George, 2005). However, if these strategies prove insufficient, the interviewed managers ultimately revoke remote work privileges, again, utilising the same carriers as for initial trust-establishment, but with greater intensity. Whereas Stavrova et al. (2023) caution that such actions may be interpreted as signs of managerial distrust from the manager, the interviewed managers explicitly present them as necessary responses to a loss of trust.

Sub-conclusion: The findings suggest that for trust to be maintained in hybrid settings, face-to-face interactions remain a critical component. Managers utilise different carriers depending on if trust must be established, maintained or re-established. Informal interactions and continuous communication are important to maintain trust, while oversight and on-site presence are employed in the initial establishment of trust and when trust must be actively re-established. For example, if a manager perceives there to be a lack of integrity, increased efforts for informal interactions are made. At the same time, a lack of informal interactions within the organisation, can negatively impact the integrity component, which emphasises the cyclical nature of the model, see figure 6.2.

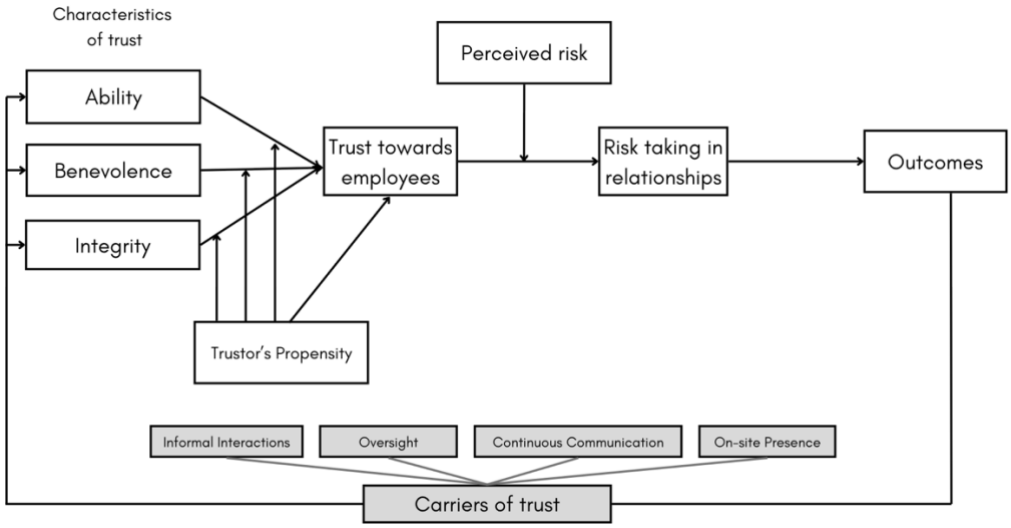


Figure 6.2: Integrative model of Organisational Trust (Mayer et al., 1995), modified by Fjellestad & Låftman, 2025

6.3 Contributions

This study contributes to the growing literature on trust in hybrid work settings, called a third way of working, by reinforcing and extending prior research. While the findings support Östegård et al. (2025) in showing that managers generally trust their employees and contradict Stavrova et al. (2023), they also offer nuance by identifying notable exceptions of two male managers with extensive experience who expressed more sceptical attitudes towards remote work. Although the sample is too small to generalise, this suggests gender may influence not only the formation of trust but also the willingness to express distrust.

Whereas previous studies highlight that social interaction with leaders fosters employee trust (Presbitero & Aruta, 2024), this study focus on the reverse dynamic and shows that managers develop trust through social interactions with employees. Interviewed managers expressed a clear preference for some on-site presence, especially early on in relationships or when trust has eroded. Consistent with Norman et al. (2019) and Powell et al. (2004), the findings thus stress the continued importance of face-to face interactions for cultivating trust. Following this, previous research by Stavrova et al. (2023) predicted that managers' decisions to bring employees back to the office could signal distrust, potentially leading to a cycle of mutual

distrust. This study confirms that such actions are indeed taken when trust between the manager and employee is perceived to be low or lost.

Unlike studies focused on crisis-driven remote- and virtual work settings (Panteli et al., 2023; Gamage et al., 2024), this study focuses on the long-term perspective. It explores how managers actively establish and re-establish trust, but also proactively maintain it over time. Specifically post-crisis, in hybrid settings where trust risks gradual erosion. When trust, so to speak, is put on trial. Our findings reveal how managers adapt their trust-developing practices across coexisting physical and remote workspaces.

Furthermore, our study introduces the concept of *carriers of trust*, concrete managerial actions that support trust in hybrid environments. By integrating these into the Integrative Model of Organisational Trust (Mayer et al., 1995), the study advances the theoretic and academic discussion by showing that trust depends not only on perceived ability, benevolence, and integrity, but also on actions adapted to hybrid work dynamics.

6.4 Limitations

While this study offers valuable insights, it is important to acknowledge certain limitations. Firstly, given the sensitive nature of trust, the participants' assumptions could also have affected the results; they may have overstated their trust in their employees due to perceived social expectations. Secondly, as it follows an interpretive paradigm, the authors' prior assumptions may have influenced their analysis, introducing potential bias. Thirdly, the authors recognise that their attempt to address the limitations of the IMOT, by introducing carriers of trust, might need additional amendments.

7. Conclusion

7.1 Answer to the Research Question

Our analysis and discussion of the empirical data was conducted through the lens of the IMOT to expand the current academic understanding of trust in organisations and explore how managers

develop trust towards their employees in hybrid work environments, thereby filling the existing knowledge gap on the subject.

At first glance, managers do not perceive hybrid work to significantly affect their trust in employees. However, after investigating how managers work to establish, maintain and, if necessary, re-establish trust in hybrid work environments, we find that the dynamics of trust are indeed influenced by aspects of hybrid work. Managers adapt their leadership practices, often without explicitly acknowledging it, by relying on personal strategies tailored to hybrid contexts. They overcome the potential risk of trust-erosion in hybrid work environments by placing increased value on moments of physical co-presence, recognising that daily face-to-face interactions with employees can no longer be taken for granted.

The findings further identify four key carriers of trust: informal interactions, continuous communication, increased oversight and on-site presence. Managers draw on these depending on the employee's trustworthiness and whether trust needs to be established, maintained, or re-established. Managers approaches are found to be flexible and responsive, adjusting to perceived trust levels. A perceived lack of one characteristic can trigger the need for a carrier, yet the lack of a carrier can also undermine the characteristic. Integrity and ability appear to be the most important characteristics in trust-relationships. Benevolence can influence overall trust-levels; however, it does not seem to cause a full loss of trust.

7.2 Directions for Future Research

This study has further opened the black box for research on trust in post-pandemic hybrid setting and unfolds many different angles for potential future research. One important issue that has emerged from the study and that merits more research is a potential "gendering trust", that is, an investigation if male managers tend to exhibit greater trust-related concerns. This reflection is trigger by the responses of the two male managers who stood out in their answers. It is further interesting that the two male managers were the same two individuals who expressed a negative attitude towards remote work in general. Thus, more research is needed to understand if the two anomalies are due to gender, or whether they signal an inherent attitude towards remote work.

Another area for future research concerns the finding that managers with employees in performance-measurable roles appear to trust employees more easily compared to those in less quantifiable ones. This may stem from the clearer visibility of output, which enables performance assessment even in remote settings. To examine this on a broader scale, a quantitative study could be conducted to determine its prevalence, followed by qualitative research to explore underlying causes. Such work could clarify whether trust in hybrid settings is primarily rooted in performance outcomes, and whether this forms a key determinant of managerial trust.

8. Practical Implications

Hybrid work is a new, "third way of working". Kristi Woolsey, Associate Director at Boston Consulting Group, insightfully observes: "*A lot of people assume that because we know how to work together* [in the office]*, we know how to work apart, then we can do hybrid. But hybrid is a third way. It's incredibly difficult to do. This is the problem everyone will have to solve post-covid. It's going to be hard and it's going to be different.*" (qtd. in Jacobs, [2021] p.1). Her reflection underscores the complexity and novelty of hybrid work models and sets the stage for the present study, which seeks to address part of this challenge.

This study helps managers understand how trust is established, maintained, as well as re-established when needed within hybrid work environments. We find that based on perceived ability, benevolence and integrity of employees in situations involving risk, managers form their trust in them. These three characteristics are what forms "trustworthiness" and lays the foundation for trust. In addition to this, so called carriers (managerial actions) are found and integrated into the model to facilitate the development of trust. These are identified to be continuous communication, increased oversight, informal interactions, and on-site presence, used to different extents depending on the situation at hand. In short, the study highlights the importance of understanding the characteristics of trust as critical components in the process of trust-development, and outlines real-world strategies used by managers to do so.

Our findings offer valuable insights for managers developing hybrid work policies. By identifying when and how trust is built, the study provides essential guidance for designing

effective guidelines suited to this new work model. The results indicate that trust tends to form more easily through face-to-face interactions, suggesting that organisations should critically review and potentially revise hybrid work policies. We find that encouraging regular in-person attendance, can enhance relational dynamics and support managers in developing trust. Thus, it can be suggested that new employees should be required to work fully on-site during the initial month of employment, with a gradual increase in remote work flexibility as they become more integrated into the organisation. Moreover, we recommend designated on-site days where departments can interact physically together, both in formal meeting-settings, but also through informal lunches and coffee chats.

While our findings emphasise the crucial aspect of on-site presence in facilitating trust-development, it is equally important that organisations do not overlook the employees working remote in these processes. Managers should thus adapt their remote work policies to better accommodate the individual needs of different departments and individuals, ensuring that remote employees remain engaged and connected, while also maintaining sufficient on-site presence to uphold the intended purpose of hybrid work arrangements. Through these recommendations, the study offers both practical insights for individual managers, but it also holds broader implications for organisational policy, particularly in designing hybrid frameworks that actively support trust development.

Furthermore, the findings are not only relevant for managers and organisations, but also for employees. Social interactions with leaders have been shown to enhance employee trust (Presbitero & Aruta, 2024) and our findings suggest that the reverse is also true. This means that when managers engage in meaningful interactions with their employees, it not only strengthens their trust in the employees but also fosters greater trust from employees toward their managers. As trust is a such an important element of effective organisational functioning, its development is essential for both parties.

The qualitative nature of the study allowed for an in-depth exploration of managers' perceptions of trust in their employees. This approach facilitated a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the managerial thought processes than a quantitative study would have permitted. Given the sensitivity of the topic, particular attention was paid to identifying deviant

responses or hesitations in answering follow-up questions, to ensure the credibility and reliability of the data. Moreover, ethical considerations, such as anonymity of the interviewees, were carefully upheld to reduce the risk associated with sensitivity and encourage openness during the interviews. This has strengthened the scientific quality of the study and supports the validity of its findings and conclusions.

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10. Appendices

10.1 Appendix 1: Interview questions

Translated from Swedish to English

Background

1. Which sector do you work within? Could you briefly describe your role and responsibilities?

2. Do you allow your employees to work remotely?
   - Policy from you or the company?

3. What is the general distribution between employees working from home versus at the office? How many days a week?

4. How long have you had personnel responsibility in a hybrid working environment?

Guiding questions

5. What is your personal understanding of the word trust?

6. Do you feel that your employees are doing what they are supposed to do when working from home, even if you can't see what they are doing in the same way?

7. How do you lead and manage employees who work remotely versus on-site?

8. How do you work to create and maintain trust when your employees work from home?

9. Do you feel that you and your employees share the same values regarding what is perceived right and wrong?

10. How does hybrid work affect you in your role as a leader?

11. What challenges do you experience as a leader when it comes to hybrid work?

12. Do you have any activities outside of work, like after-work events, to get to know each other better?

13. Do you feel that your employees are engaged in your well-being and your workload/work-life balance?

10.2 Appendix 2: Email sent to potential interviewees

Translated from Swedish to English
Hi [Recipient],

We are two students from the Stockholm School of Economics currently writing our bachelor's thesis in Management, focusing on collaboration and trust in remote work settings.

We would like to kindly ask if you would be available and interested in participating in an interview. The interview would take approximately 30–60 minutes and would be conducted via Teams, at a time over the coming weeks that suits you best.

Please feel free to suggest a time that works for you, and do not hesitate to reach out if you have any question

Thank you very much in advance! We would greatly appreciate your contribution, as it would be highly valuable for our research.

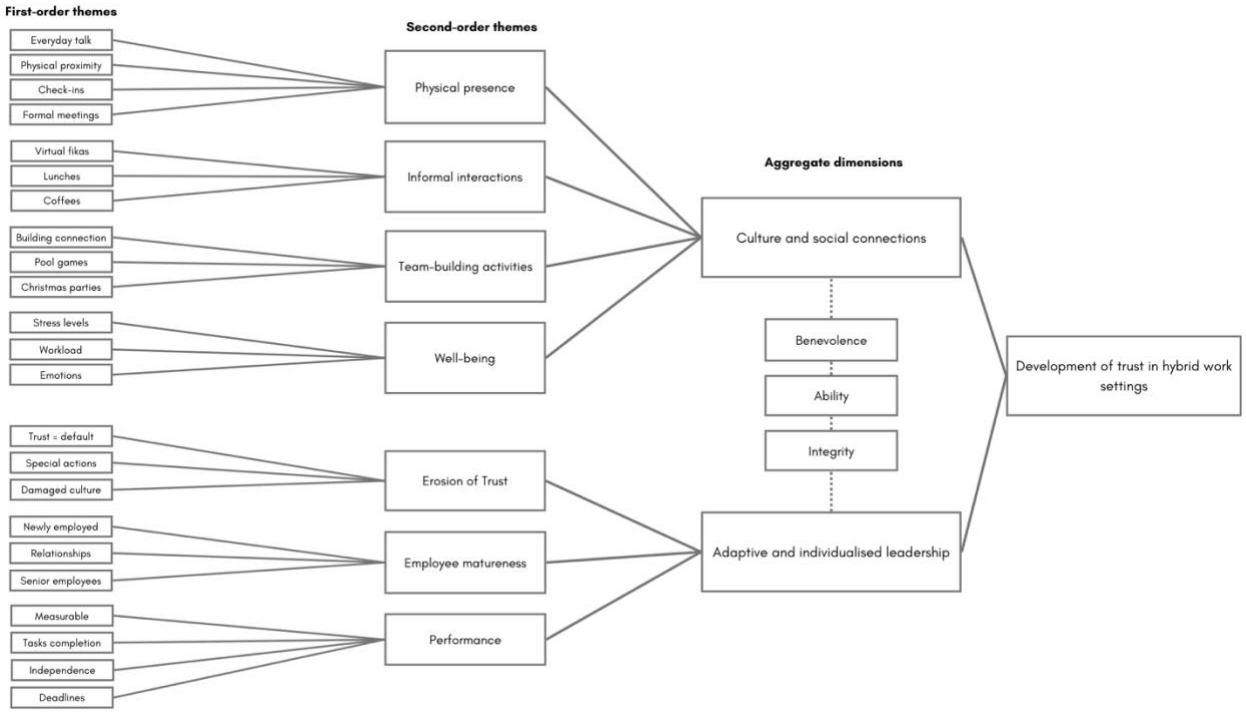
We look forward to hearing from you.

Best regards,
Andrea and Sandra

10.3 Appendix 3: Respondent list

Sex	Sector	Length	Age	(~) Years in a managerial position	Code
Female	Non-profit	30:41	55	22	F22-non-profit
Male	Security	39:54	57	24	M24-security
Male	Telecom	41:06	57	11	M11-telecom
Male	Banking	32:29	59	26	M26-banking
Female	Consulting/law	29:34	57	20	F20-consulting/law
Female	Non-profit	28:12	56	20	F20-non-profit
Female	Tools	17:49	50	15	F15-tools
Female	Banking	35:18	50	14	F14-banking
Male	Real estate	33:53	56	18	M18-real-estate
Male	Care and welfare	25:09	51	7	M7-care-and-welfare
Female	Financial	19:20	63	29	F30-financial
Male	Facilities/law	28:59	54	19	M19-facilities/law

10.4 Appendix 4: Complete Thematic Analysis



10.5 Appendix 5: Spider-web alternative

