

Joining and Staying: The Motivational Mechanisms in Professional Partnerships

A Qualitative Study on Motivation in Partnership-based
Professional Services Firms

JOSEPH HAO

ELICIA HE

Bachelor Thesis

Stockholm School of Economics

2025



Abstract

This thesis explores the mechanisms that shape individual motivation to engage in and remain within professional partnerships, with a focus on sustainability-oriented consulting firms in Sweden. While professional partnerships are a central governance form in the professional services sector, they expose individuals to heightened risks and responsibilities compared to corporate structures. Despite this, many professionals choose and remain in such models, prompting the need to understand the motivational forces at play. Addressing a gap in existing literature, which tends to focus on organizational-level dynamics, this study adopts an integrated theoretical framework combining Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and Identity Regulation. Drawing on 28 interviews across two flat, peer-governed firms, the findings show that motivation is shaped by need satisfaction (autonomy, competence, relatedness), but also by identity processes that reinforce commitment over time. Three key propositions emerge: (1) motivation is sustained through the integration of self-identity with the organization's mission; (2) minor frustrations are tolerated when perceived as voluntary trade-offs aligned with personal values; and (3) tensions between individual and collective goals are resolved through social environments that support psychological needs. These insights contribute to both motivational theory and partnership governance literature, offering practical implications for sustaining engagement in decentralized, mission-driven work settings.

Keywords

Professional Partnerships, Professional Service Firms, Motivation, Self-Determination Theory (SDT), Identity Regulation.

Authors

Joseph Hao (25492)

Elicia He (25630)

Supervisor

Filip Wijkström, Affiliated Researcher, Department of Management and Organization

Examinator

Laurence Romani, Associate Professor, Department of Management and Organization

Bachelor Thesis in Management

Bachelor Program in Business and Economics

Stockholm School of Economics

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Acknowledgements

It goes without saying that this thesis would not have come to fruition without the guidance, support, and generosity of others. As we bring this academic project to a close, we want to extend our heartfelt gratitude to everyone who contributed to our work. Since this thesis also marks the conclusion of our Bachelor's journey at SSE, we would like to take a moment to reflect on the broader journey we've had.

First and foremost, we wish to express our sincere gratitude to our supervisor, Filip Wijkström, for his invaluable support, critical insights, and unwavering patience. Filip's thoughtful reflections and care throughout the process kept us grounded and helped sharpen our thinking. We are equally grateful to Laurence Romani, the course director, for her guidance in structuring the thesis process that helped us stay on course. We would also like to thank all the members of our supervision group: Johanna Alkesjö, David Castellanos, Adam Fogelholm Khebou, Althea Liwendahl, Malte Nyholm, and Mohammed Talballa, for your inspiring discussions, thoughtful feedback, and camaraderie throughout our sessions. Your insights and encouragement consistently pushed our thinking forward.

Secondly, a special thank you to all the individuals who participated in our study. Your openness, engagement, and willingness to share your experiences made this thesis possible. Every conversation with you was not only informative but also genuinely meaningful, we deeply appreciate your time, patience, and interest in our work.

Thirdly, we want to thank SSE and its faculty for the education we've received. From the moment we stepped through the Oak Door on our first day, this academic journey has been transformational. Coming from non-business academic backgrounds, our time at SSE has expanded our perspectives and reshaped the way we think. We are especially grateful to the Department of Management, whose courses and teachers sparked our shared passion for the field and ultimately inspired the focus of this thesis.

Finally, to our friends, both at SSE and beyond, and our families: thank you for the unwavering support, for every conversation that pulled us out of a slump, and for all the joy and tears we've shared over the past few years. They say you are the sum of the people around you, and we consider ourselves incredibly lucky. Your presence has shaped us into who we are today, and we are endlessly grateful.

Joseph and Elicia,
May 12th, 2025

Definitions

Concept	Definition
<i>Professional Partnership</i>	An organizational model characterized by collaboration and shared ownership between two or more individuals who jointly share profits and risks (Bannock & Manser 2003).
<i>Professional Service Firm (PSF)</i>	A firm that uses the specialist technical knowledge of its personnel to create customised solutions to clients (Empson, 2000).
<i>Motivation</i>	The state of being moved to do something (Deci & Ryan, 2000b).
<i>Intrinsic motivation</i>	Refers to doing something because it is inherently interesting or enjoyable ((Deci & Ryan, 2000b).
<i>Extrinsic motivation</i>	Refers to doing something because it leads to a separable outcome (Deci & Ryan, 2000b).
<i>Identity</i>	An individual's sense of self, defined by unique physical, psychological, and social characteristics, as well as affiliations and roles, and grounded in a felt continuity of being the same person over time (American Psychological Association, n.d).
<i>Professional identity</i>	The attitudes, values, knowledge, beliefs and skills shared with others within a professional group (Adams et al., 2006).
<i>Personal identity</i>	Personal identities are perception of traits and characteristics, such as being "smart." (Oyserman, 2017).
<i>Social identity</i>	Social identities are social relationships, roles, and group memberships, such as being "friendly," a "mother," or "American." (Oyserman, 2017).
<i>Self Determination Theory (SDT)</i>	A theory of motivation that explains how human behavior is influenced by the degree to which the behavior is autonomous or self-determined (Deci & Ryan, 2008).
<i>Identity Regulation</i>	Identity regulation refers to the more or less intentional effects of social practices upon processes of identity construction and reconstruction (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002).

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background

In today's organizational landscape, a wide range of structural forms can be found, reflecting diverse approaches to governance and coordination (Greenwood & Empson, 2003). Within the diversity of structures, professional partnerships is one distinctive model, characterized by collaboration and shared ownership between two or more individuals sharing profit and risks (Bannock & Manser 2003). Such structure is a particularly prominent organizational form in human-capital intensive professional services, standing in contrast to the dominance of corporations in most other industries (Levin & Tadelis, 2002), and the Professional Service Firm (PSF) sector itself has become one of the fastest-growing, most profitable, and influential segments of the global economy (Hinings et al, 2015). The importance of PSFs goes well beyond their economic size. They are fundamental to the functioning of modern business by contributing to the development of human capital, driving innovation in service offerings, influencing public sector reform, shaping the structure and regulation of financial markets, and defining professional norms in areas such as law and accounting (Sharma, 1997). The collaborative nature of partnerships may also hold relevance for other organizational structures as collaboration has increasingly been recognized as a key governance mechanism that enhances coordination and strengthens competitive advantage (Bedwell et al., 2012). In addition, collaboration within professional service firms has also been shown to improve employee retention, as working in teams fosters a stronger sense of identification with the firm and reduces individualistic behavior (Gardner, 2013).

Despite the significant economic, societal, and organizational influence of PSFs and the partnership model, studies have shown that on an individual level, partnership structures expose partners to increased risks compared to corporate forms of organization. Two core limitations contribute to this vulnerability. First, unlike private corporations, partnerships lack asset partitioning, meaning that partners' personal assets are not legally separated from those of the firm, leaving them personally liable for organizational debts and obligations (Hansmann & Kraakman, 2000). Second, partners may be held accountable for the misconduct of their colleagues, even when they had no knowledge of or involvement in the transgression. While the

introduction of limited liability partnerships (LLPs) in some jurisdictions has mitigated certain risks, these protections remain partial: individual partners are still fully liable for their own negligence, and the firm's collective assets remain exposed (Greenwood & Empson, 2003). This raises a crucial question: what motivates individuals to join and remain within such high-risk organizational structures? Understanding this is particularly important given the enduring presence of professional partnerships and their far-reaching externalities across societal and professional domains, as individual motivation plays a central role in both the formation and sustainability of these organizations.

1.2 Research gap

Despite extensive research on professional partnerships, most existing studies focus on organizational-level dynamics (Bannock & Manser 2003; Empson & Chapman, 2006; von Nordenflycht, 2010), or analyzing governance structures and incentive systems (Greenwood et al., 1990; Huddart & Liang, 2005). Others adopt sociocultural perspectives, examining how identity and informal norms regulate behavior in the absence of hierarchy (Alvesson et al., 2015; Strömbäck, 2021). While these perspectives explain how partnerships function, and may offer indirect clues about motivation, they provide limited direct insight into why individuals choose to engage in partnerships or what sustains their participation over time. Although some studies explore collaboration outcomes (Lazega, 2001; Gardner & Valentine, 2014), the underlying motivational processes remain largely unspecified. This reveals a clear research gap: the need to understand the individual-level motivation for joining and staying as partners within professional partnerships.

1.3 Research Question and Purpose

Considering that partnership structures expose individuals to higher personal and professional risks compared to corporate organizational forms (Greenwood & Empson, 2003; Hansmann & Kraakman, 2000), and given the limited exploration of individual-level motivation for engaging in such arrangements, the research question of this thesis is:

- *What are the mechanisms that shape individuals' motivation to engage in and remain as partners within professional partnerships?*

An integrated model of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and Identity Regulation is adopted as the theoretical framework for addressing the research question. While SDT has previously been applied to examine motivation in both workplace and partnership settings (Gagné & Deci, 2005; Solheim-Kile & Wald, 2019; Selvamani et al., 2024), the empirical findings of this study indicate that identity plays a central role in shaping motivational dynamics (Oyserman et al., 2017; Waterman, 2004). By incorporating Identity Regulation, which conceptualizes identity as socially constructed and shaped through organizational discourse (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002), this study complements and extends the SDT framework. In doing so, it not only addresses the research gap on motivation in professional partnerships but also offers a theoretical contribution by positioning identity not merely as an outcome of internalization, but as a mediating force that shapes how motivation is formed and sustained.

1.4 Scope and Delimitation

Professional partnerships encompass a wide range of firm types, including law, architecture, and consulting (Greenwood & Empson, 2003). This study focuses on consulting firms, selected due to the author's academic background and established access to relevant firms. The national context is particularly relevant, as national culture influences individuals' motivation at work (Gavrić, Čukanović-Karavidić, & Pešić, 2020), which in turn shapes how motivational dynamics are expressed and understood. Sweden was therefore chosen as the country of analysis, as the author's cultural familiarity reduces the risk of misinterpreting context-dependent data due to cultural differences. The study focuses on individual-level motivational mechanisms within professional partnerships. Accordingly, the unit of analysis is not the firms, but the individual partner, while the firms serve as contextual settings in which motivational processes are examined. Nevertheless, the organizational context remains analytically significant. As Empson and Chapman (2006) observe, as partnership-based PSFs expand in size, they often become more centralized and formalized, potentially diluting core partnership characteristics. To examine partnerships in their most archetypal form, characterized by limited managerial control, consensus-based strategic decision-making, and peer-based governance structures (Greenwood et al., 1990), this study focuses on small consulting firms with minimal or no internal hierarchy.

Unlike previous studies that focus on collaboration outcomes and only indirectly relate to motivation (e.g., Lazega, 2001; Gardner & Valentine, 2014), this study directly explores motivational mechanisms through the lens of need fulfillment. Staying true to its foundation in management research, it adopts a managerial perspective on partnerships, distinct from economic approaches like Levin and Tadelis (2002), who develop a theory of partnership emergence and persistence. Moreover, this is a qualitative study that does not seek to quantify motivation or test causal relationships.

2. Literature Review

This literature review examines existing related research on individual motivation in professional partnerships. The review traces three key areas: (1) the structural and informal features that define partnerships, (2) the role of collaboration and contextual conditions in shaping motivation, and (3) identity, purpose, and internalization as deeper drivers of motivation and commitment.

2.1 Conceptualizing Professional Partnerships: Structure, Regulation, and the Foundations of Motivation

This section lays the foundation for understanding the organizational dynamics of professional partnerships and PSFs. It first outlines the formal governance structures that define these firms, and then explores the informal and symbolic mechanisms, such as incentives, peer monitoring, and identity regulation, that shape partner behavior and engagement in practice. Together, these elements provide a contextual backdrop for understanding how individual motivation may be formed and sustained in partnership-based environments.

2.1.1 Formal Structure and Governance

Professional partnerships are a distinctive organizational model, characterized by collaboration and shared ownership between individuals who share both profit and risk (Bannock & Manser, 2003). They are particularly prevalent in the professional services industry, where they have long been viewed as an optimal governance form. Empson and Chapman (2006) attribute this to their regulatory origins, symbolic alignment with professionalism, and ability to balance autonomy, trust, and ownership. They identify three key governance principles: constrained managerial

authority, professional autonomy, and a focus on long-term value over short-term profit. To capture how such firms operate strategically, Greenwood et al (1990) introduced the P2-form, a governance model designed for large professional partnerships. It emphasizes decentralized operational control, peer-based governance, and consensus-driven decision-making, highlighting how these firms diverge from hierarchical corporate structures. von Nordenflycht (2010) adds a broader structural lens, defining PSFs by their high knowledge intensity, low capital intensity, and professionalized workforce. These traits shape organizational preferences for peer governance and informal management systems, aligning with Empson & Chapman and Greenwood et al's findings.

2.1.2 Regulation Through Incentives and Informal Mechanisms

Scholars have examined how compensation schemes and ownership structures influence partner behavior in PSFs, particularly through the balance between professional and commercial incentives (Coram & Robinson, 2017; Huddart & Liang, 2005; Levin & Tadelis, 2005; Morris & Pinnington, 1998; Vandenhoute et al., 2020). These studies highlight how profit-sharing can align incentives and sustain engagement, but also point to challenges such as free riding and the need for peer monitoring, especially in larger partnerships where effort is difficult to observe (Huddart & Liang, 2005).

While partnerships are formally structured around decentralized control and peer-based governance, Pinnington and Morris (1996) reveal that beneath these ideals lies a more complex reality. Their study shows how interpersonal dynamics, informal hierarchies, and partner seniority influence how control is actually exercised. Dynamics in professional partnerships in this way is not only a matter of shared norms but also shaped by subtle power relations and social positioning.

Further developing the understanding of PSF dynamics, Hinings et al. (2015) shift attention from purely structural characteristics to the central role of identity. They argue that professionals are bound not only by formal governance systems but also by shared understandings of professionalism shaped through internal socialization and symbolic norms. As they write, “the firm itself is emerging as an increasingly important site where professional identities are

mediated, formed and transformed” (Hinings et al., 2015, p. 13; drawing on Cooper & Robson, 2006). Strömbäck (2021) offers empirical support for this identity-centric view, showing how partners in law firms often resist formal leadership roles, prioritizing their professional identity as practitioners over managerial responsibility. Interestingly, Strömbäck also found that the consensus-driven model slows decision-making, and despite desiring more structure, partners preferred flexible processes. Alvesson et al (2015), on the other hand, contribute directly to the identity dimension through a theoretical lens, highlighting the tensions between autonomy and control in PSFs, where professionals seek independence but are subtly governed through cultural and ideological mechanisms. In this context, identity regulation often substitutes for formal structures or behavioral monitoring.

Together, these contributions present a trend toward a more multifaceted view of PSF governance. This is also reflected in Greenwood et al. (2017), who revisit their earlier P2-form framework, critique it for overlooking the normative dimension of professional partnerships, and propose a P3-form that foregrounds organizational purpose as a core element of governance.

2.2 Motivation and Collaboration

This section explores existing studies relating motivation to collaboration in professional partnerships. It first reviews studies focused on peer-based motivation in partnership settings, and then draws on adjacent literature to illustrate how contextual factors may further shape professionals' willingness to collaborate.

2.2.1 Motivation and Collaboration in Partnerships

Motivation in partnerships and PSFs remains underexplored, especially regarding what drives individuals to engage and stay. Gardner (2015) notes limited progress in identifying the social mechanisms that support peer cooperation. Some studies have begun to address this gap. Levin and Tadelis (2002) examine partnership formation through an economic incentive lens, offering an indirect explanation behind the motivation for their emergence. Lazega (2001), in contrast, explores the formation of stable peer groups, arguing they support collaboration, resource sharing, and collective identity. This analysis highlights the firm-level implications of peer-based collaboration, however, it leaves the individual-level motivational mechanisms largely

unspecified. Gardner and Valentine (2014) help bridge this gap, finding that professionals who collaborated gained reputational benefits and could charge more for cross-disciplinary work. However, further work by Gardner et al (2015) often avoids collaboration due to short-term costs, despite potential long-term gains. This dynamic contrasts with Empson and Chapman's (2006) observation that professional partnerships are governed by a focus on long-term value over short-term profit. While this principle may guide firms at the organizational level, it does not always appear to shape individual partner behavior. This disconnect once again raises the central question: what sustains engagement in long-term professional partnerships when collaboration can be costly upfront?

2.2.2 Adjacent Insights from Intra-Organizational Collaboration Studies

Briscoe and Tsai (2011) show that past collaboration habits influence partners' willingness to share work after a merger, with cross-practice experience boosting collaboration and revenue. Zenk et al. (2022) examine collaboration in the form of knowledge sharing, finding that intra-organizational knowledge sharing is driven more by contextual factors, such as support systems, peer culture, and reciprocity norms, than by intrinsic motivation. Similarly, Parding et al. (2024) highlight how institutional logics and organizational conditions like autonomy and opportunity shape professionals' willingness to collaborate, even without directly measuring motivation.

2.3 Identity, Motivation and Purpose

As discussed earlier, identity often functions as a form of regulation in professional partnerships, subtly guiding behavior in the absence of formal control. This section builds on that insight by examining whether identity, and its connection to purpose, can also help explain individual motivation. It draws on three strands of research: identity-driven motivation, mission alignment, and the internalization of purpose, to better understand what sustains engagement in partnership-based settings where identity plays a central regulatory role.

2.3.1 Identity-Driven Motivation

A growing strand of motivation research highlights identity as a key driver. Oyserman et al. (2017) argue that motivation emerges from the dynamic activation of identities by situational

cues, which shape what goals feel meaningful and attainable. When a relevant identity becomes salient, individuals are more likely to persist and self-regulate. This view aligns with Alvesson et al. (2015) discussed earlier, who argue that identity regulation often substitutes for formal structures or behavioral monitoring. Connected to this dimension, Waterman (2004) offered a complementary perspective by emphasizing the role of intrinsic motivation in identity formation, concluding that intrinsically motivated identity commitments, i.e. those experienced as personally expressive, are more sustainable and fulfilling than externally imposed ones.

2.3.2 Purpose and Mission as Motivational Drivers

While identity-driven motivation explains how individuals align with long-term goals, it does not fully account for commitment to organizations with strong normative aims, something Greenwood et al. (2017) highlight in their P3-form, which extends traditional partnership models by emphasizing purpose as a meaningful organizational dimension. To deepen this understanding, it is necessary to explore how purpose- and mission-driven orientations influence motivational processes in such contexts. Drawing on goal-setting theory, Locke and Latham (1990) suggest individuals exert more effort when goals align with valued outcomes, helping explain why people may be more motivated when their work serves a meaningful social cause rather than profit alone. Cassar (2019) expanded this and showed that a prosocial mission can substitute for higher pay, but tailoring the mission more closely to the individual does not produce extra effort. While other studies confirm that there is a positive relationship between mission match and exerted or stated effort (e.g., Gerhards, 2015; Koppel & Regner, 2014; Resh et al., 2017).

2.3.3 Autonomy and the Internalization of Purpose

Van Tuin et al. (2020) use the Self-Determination Theory (SDT) to examine whether corporate purpose enhances motivation. While cross-sectional data link purpose to autonomous motivation and engagement, their longitudinal results do not confirm a causal relationship, leaving the internalization process unresolved. Jeworrek and Mertins (2022) add nuance by distinguishing between assigned and self-chosen missions. They find that only those who actively choose to work for a social cause show increased performance, suggesting that self-determined choice, not

the mission itself, drives motivation. This reflects SDT's concept of introjected regulation and may explain the mixed results in Van Tuin et al.'s study.

3. Theoretical framework

The preceding literature review identified growing scholarly interest in professional partnerships and the motivational dynamics that underpin them. However, existing research often treats motivation and identity as separate or static elements, overlooking how they interact within organizational contexts. To address this gap, the present study adopts an integrated theoretical framework combining Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and Identity Regulation. This framework enables an analysis of the psychological and organizational mechanisms that shape individuals' motivation to engage in and remain within partnership-based organizational structures.

3.1 Self Determination Theory

3.1.1 Theoretical Relevance

Ryan and Deci (2000c) introduce Self-Determination Theory (SDT) as a comprehensive framework for understanding how social environments influence human motivation, development, and well-being. In organizational research, SDT has been widely adopted to examine employee motivation, engagement, and how contextual factors shape work behavior (Gagné & Deci, 2005). It has also been applied to study how corporate purpose influences motivation and engagement at work (van Tuin et al., 2020). More recently, SDT has been extended to partnership contexts, including cross-sector, inter-organizational, and institutional collaborations, where sustained engagement depends on the quality of motivation. Across these settings, studies show that need-supportive conditions can strengthen goal alignment, stakeholder involvement, and long-term collaboration (Grolnick et al., 2015; Solheim-Kile & Wald, 2019; Selvamani et al., 2024). For example, Selvamani et al. (2024) explicitly frame SDT as a theoretically appropriate lens for tracing how deeply held inner values are internalized and translated into collaboration intentions, through the satisfaction of basic psychological needs. This emphasis on inner values and internalization parallels La Guardia's (2009) use of SDT to explore identity formation, showing how motivation rooted in intrinsic values facilitates the

integration of externally derived goals into one's sense of self. These applications together underscore SDT's relevance for analyzing how partnership structures influence motivational quality, internalization, and identity's role in long-term engagement.

3.1.2 Psychological needs and motivational impact

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) emphasizes the importance of the quality of motivation over its quantity (Deci & Ryan, 2008). At its core, SDT proposes that three innate psychological needs, autonomy, competence, and relatedness, are essential for optimal functioning, internalization, and well-being. When these needs are supported, people are more likely to engage in activities with volition, persistence, and psychological health (Ryan & Deci, 2000a; Deci & Ryan, 2000c).

- Autonomy refers to the experience of volition in initiating and regulating behavior and acting in accordance with one's integrated sense of self (Deci & Ryan, 2000c; Deci & Ryan, 2015).
- Competence involves feeling effective in one's activities and having opportunities to exercise and extend one's capabilities (Ryan & Deci, 2000b; Deci & Ryan, 2015). People are naturally inclined to engage in tasks that challenge and develop their skills (Deci & Ryan, 2000c).
- Relatedness reflects the need to feel connected to others, to love and care and to be loved and cared for (Ryan & Deci, 2000a). It refers to the sense of belonging and mutual regard that allows individuals to willingly internalize social norms (Deci & Ryan, 2000c; Ryan & Deci, 2000b).

3.1.3 Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, and the process of internalization

SDT distinguishes intrinsic motivation (the doing of an activity for its inherent interest or enjoyment) from extrinsic motivation, which refers to engaging in an activity to attain a separable outcome, such as rewards, approval, or avoiding punishment (Ryan & Deci, 2000b). Importantly, SDT treats extrinsic motivation as a continuum of internalization that reflects the degree to which an external regulation has integrated with the self (Deci & Ryan, 2000c). A progression from control to autonomy occurs through a developmental process of internalization and integration, fostered by social environments that satisfy the three basic psychological needs

and lead to enhanced well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000a; Deci & Ryan, 2008; Deci & Ryan, 2015). The theory outlines four types of regulation in the process of internalization and integration, arranged by degree of autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 2000c):

- External Regulation: The least autonomous form of extrinsic motivation. Behavior is driven by external contingencies such as rewards or punishments.
- Introjected Regulation: A partially internalized form of control where the individual acts out of internal pressures such as guilt, anxiety, or to gain self-worth. Although the regulation is internal, it is not truly accepted as one's own.
- Identified Regulation: A more autonomous form of motivation where the individual consciously values the behavior and accepts it as personally important.
- Integrated Regulation: The most autonomous form of extrinsic motivation. Occurs when identified regulations are fully assimilated into the self, congruent with one's values and needs. Although performed for instrumental reasons, the activity is experienced as self-determined.

3.2 Identity Regulation

3.2.1 Theoretical Relevance

SDT emphasizes identity as a key part of the internalization process, describing how external regulations, when fully integrated, are assimilated into one's sense of self and aligned with personal values (Ryan & Deci, 2000a; Deci & Ryan, 2000c). This highlights identity as central to motivational quality but also raises a further question: how is identity itself shaped? This question is particularly relevant in the professional partnership context, where Hinings et al. (2015) pointed out that professional identity within PSFs is increasingly defined by adherence to firm-level cultural expectations. To capture this socially constructed dimension, Identity Regulation proposed by Alvesson and Willmott (2002) offers a complementary lens, explaining how organizations shape the very selves into which motivation is internalized.

3.2.2 Conceptualization of Identity Regulation

According to Alvesson and Willmott (2002), identity regulation is a form of organizational control that operates by shaping how organizational members define themselves. It does not rely on formal rules or hierarchical authority but works through discourse, symbols, and social

practices. These practices seek to condition how individuals interpret their roles, values, and behaviors in ways that are consistent with organizational objectives.

Their framework outlines a dynamic relationship between three interdependent components (see Figure 3.1):

- **Identity Regulation:** The organization's discursive and symbolic practices that define ideal behaviors, values, and subject positions. These may include leadership language, team norms, internal storytelling, recruitment discourse, job titles, and role narratives.
- **Identity Work:** The individual's active interpretation, negotiation, and adoption (or resistance) of these organizational cues to construct a coherent sense of self.
- **Self-Identity:** The relatively stable, but still evolving, narrative an individual holds about who they are in relation to their work and organization. This is both the product and target of identity regulation.

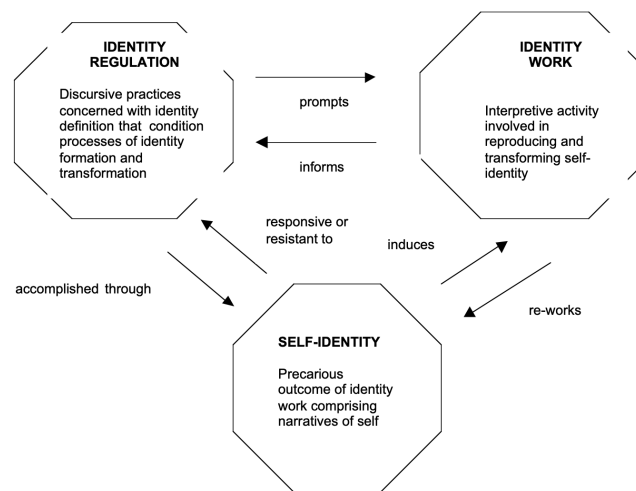


Figure 3.1 Identity Regulation Framework (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002)

However, identity regulation is not deterministic: individuals may resist, reinterpret, or negotiate these identity constructions, and that control through identity is often precarious, contested, and incomplete (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002).

3.3 Theory Discussion

As outlined in Section 3.1.1, there is strong justification for applying SDT to analyze motivation in partnership-based and collaborative organizational settings, both due to theoretical alignment and prior empirical applications. This study further argues that SDT is particularly well-suited for examining individual motivation within professional service firms (PSFs), as the contextual features of partnerships closely correspond with SDT's three basic psychological needs. First, Empson and Chapman (2006) identify constrained managerial authority and professional autonomy as central governance principles in PSFs. This directly relates to SDT's autonomy dimension and raises the question of whether such structures directly support individuals' need for autonomy. Second, PSFs are characterized by high knowledge intensity (von Nordenflycht, 2010), prompting inquiry into whether these conditions facilitate or hinder the fulfillment of competence needs. Third, PSFs operate through consensus-driven governance and are inherently collaborative (Strömbäck, 2021), while simultaneously relying on informal peer-based control mechanisms (Huddart & Liang, 2005; Pinnington & Morris, 1996). This complex social dynamic makes it particularly relevant to explore how it affects the fulfillment of relatedness needs.

While Self-Determination Theory (SDT) offers a robust framework for understanding how external regulations are internalized through the satisfaction of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, it generally treats identity as the outcome of this process rather than a dynamic input. It does not account for how identity itself, especially when viewed as fluid, socially constructed, or contextually fragmented, might influence the satisfaction of psychological needs and the internalization process. This theoretical gap is further demonstrated by Oyserman et al. (2017) arguing that motivation is identity-contingent, enhanced when goals align with activated self-concepts. This shifts the understanding of identity from a passive endpoint to an active, shaping force. Building on this, Alvesson et al. (2015) emphasize that identity is often constructed through organizational discourses that substitute for formal control, an insight that aligns with Hinings et al.'s (2015) findings that professional identity in PSFs is increasingly defined by adherence to firm-level cultural norms.

La Guardia (2009) extends SDT by examining identity development, showing how individuals form, negotiate, and reconfigure identities in response to need-supportive environments. Her

work adds nuance by portraying identity as evolving through motivational and social contexts. Still, her application remains largely one-directional: identity is shaped by SDT mechanisms, but does not in turn shape them. To address this gap, Identity Regulation (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002) provides a complementary lens by conceptualizing identity as a socially situated and ongoing process. By integrating this perspective, the present study aligns with the argument advanced by Oyserman et al. (2017), that motivation is contingent upon identity. This bidirectional view complements La Guardia's approach by proposing that identity not only results from internalization, but also shapes the conditions under which it occurs.

3.4 Theory usage and summary

This section outlines how the combined framework will be applied in the empirical analysis. By integrating Self-Determination Theory and Identity Regulation, the study develops an analytical lens that captures both the psychological and social dimensions of motivation in partnership-based organizations. SDT is used to explore how the unique contextual features of partnerships, such as decentralized control, peer-based governance, and consensus-driven decision-making (Greenwood et al., 1990; Pinnington & Morris, 1996; Strömbäck, 2021), create social environments that support or frustrate the fulfillment of the basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. These needs, in turn, influence the degree to which externally driven behaviors are internalized and become self-determined. To account for how individual identities are shaped within professional partnerships, the framework incorporates Identity Regulation (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002), which explains how organizational discourses and social practices influence individuals' self-understandings. This perspective is used to uncover how individuals' identity-related processes mediate the fulfillment of psychological needs and the internalization of external demands into personally endorsed motivations. This integrated model (see Figure 3.2) enables a layered understanding of motivation as both psychologically grounded and socially constructed. The model does not merely combine SDT and Identity Regulation, but adapts them to better fit the partnership context.

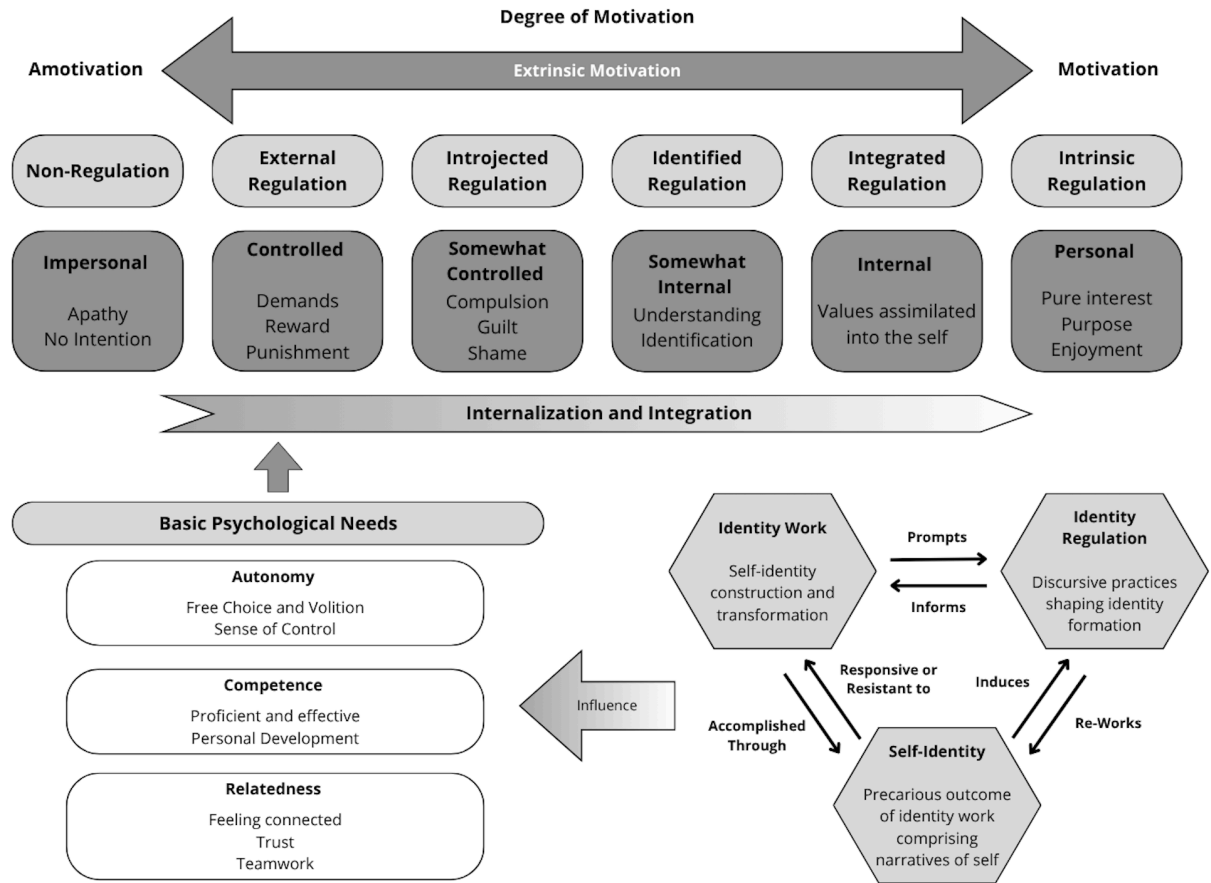


Figure 3.2 Integrated Model of Self-Determination and Identity Regulation (Hao & He, 2025)

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Philosophy and Approach

4.1.1 Research Philosophy

The Interpretivist paradigm is deemed optimal for this study. Firstly, the ontology of interpretivism assumes a complex and rich reality open for multiple interpretations, aligning it with the aim of creating new and richer understandings of motivation. Furthermore, the epistemology of interpretivism focuses on individual narratives required to address the identified gap of individual-level research on motivation. The typical research method of this paradigm consisting of in-depth qualitative investigations is also suited for accessing these individual narratives. While several measures are taken in the research design to enhance rigor, reflecting

the acknowledgement that the findings will inevitably be influenced by the researchers interpretation, as highlighted in the axiology of interpretivism. (Saunders et al., 2023).

4.1.2 Research Approach

The study adopts an abductive approach, meaning an iterative process of theory development, data collection, and analysis. The approach aims to combine inductive sensitivity for emerging themes with deductive grounding in established theories, allowing us to refine our conceptual framework as new patterns and insights surfaced (Saunders et al., 2023). The abductive approach aims to optimize the findings' reflection of individuals' experiences, allowing space for results that are not expected by only following predetermined themes.

4.2 Research Design

4.2.1 Qualitative Research Design

A qualitative research methodology is adopted. Firstly, the research aim expands beyond whether different mechanisms matter for motivation to study how and why they matter. Secondly, as identity and motivation unfold over time, a qualitative investigation is suited for capturing them as processes, rather than static states. Thirdly, the theoretical framework adopted in the study assumes reality as influenced by the external social context, which is consistent with the typical epistemology of qualitative methods. (Saunders et al., 2023)

4.2.2 Semi-structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in the study to offer the suitable flexibility for abductive and qualitative research approaches. The use of a guiding interview protocol (see Appendix 1.) with open-ended questions is appropriate for the individuals' unique yet comparable experiences. Furthermore, given the interpretivist position of the study, semi-structured interviews reflect the acknowledgement that data richness depends on more than physical access to participants, but also on gaining cognitive access to their reflections. (Saunders et al., 2023).

4.3 Data Collection

4.3.1 Sampling Strategy

The interview sample consists of 28 interviews conducted with 17 individuals working across two partnership-based sustainability consulting firms based in Stockholm (See Appendix 2.). Both firms had two hierarchical levels, with almost exactly a 50/50 internal split between consultants and partners who were co-owners of the firm. Formally, the board makes more long-term decisions, such as changes in policy and the financial model. However, in practice the power distance between the two levels is close to negligible. The compensation is based entirely on profit-sharing rather than fixed salaries, where each individual charges their respective firm as separate legal entities (See Appendix 3.).

Rather than treating the firms as units of analysis, the focus is on the individuals. Based on this focus, firms were chosen to maximize conceptual return. Firstly, according to Empson and Chapman (2006), as partnership-based PSFs expand in size, they tend to shift toward more centralized and formalized systems. Therefore the smaller size of the chosen firms represented a more “pure” version of partnership. The size also implied a greater coverage, interviews were conducted with the entire population of one firm and approximately 50% of the other, ensuring broad internal representation. Secondly, the contextual similarities between the firms allowed the focus to remain on variation in individual experiences. Thirdly, the sample is heterogeneous in terms of age, professional history and academic backgrounds. Although being culturally homogeneous, the existing diversity is considered relatively satisfactory in bringing forward a variety of perspectives.

4.3.2 Interview Process

The initial interviews were 60 min. In cases where not all questions could be fully addressed during the initial session, interviewees were invited for a 15-30 min follow-up interview. All interviews were conducted digitally, recorded and transcribed to minimize human error in documentation. As the interviews were conducted in Swedish, all quotes presented in the empirical findings have been translated using Klang.AI. The structure of the interview guide aims to optimise the participants’ reflection, starting off with relatively objective questions, such

as about professional background before diving into more personal reflections around autonomy, competence, relatedness and identity-mission alignment.

4.4 Data Analysis

The interview material was systematically coded using a combination of inductive and deductive reasoning. First-order codes were developed directly from the participants' narratives, capturing recurring patterns. These were then clustered into ten second-order codes, in turn placed into third-order codes that represented components of the theoretical framework (see Figure 4.1). With the thematic structure in the empirics section directly connecting the empirical findings to the research question, the analysis section transitions from framework-driven coding to empirically grounded interpretation, where empirical findings are reorganised into thematic mechanisms, onto which the theoretical framework is then applied to answer the research question.

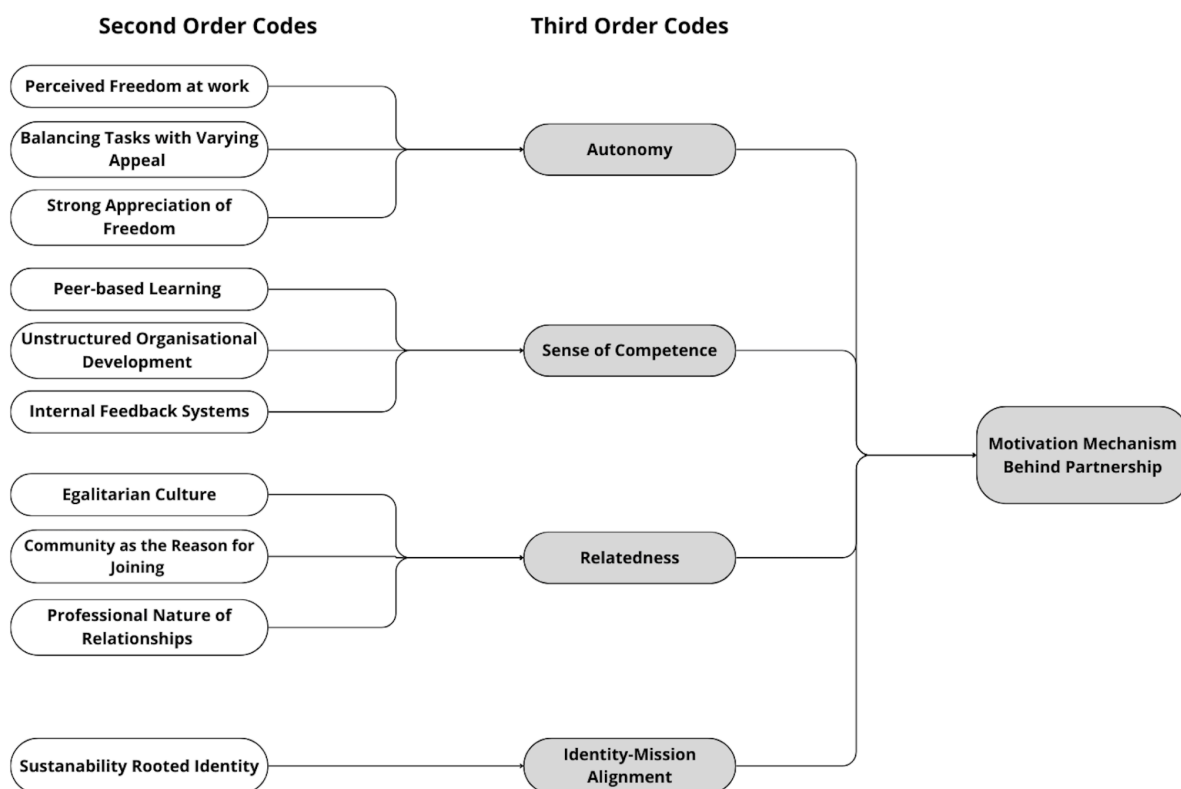


Figure 4.1 Summary of the Empirical Findings in Second and Third Order Codes
(Hao & He, 2025)

4.5 Method Discussion

4.5.1 Research reflexivity

Given the interpretivist stance of this thesis, the research process is inherently shaped by subjective interpretation from both the participant and researcher levels (Saunders et al., 2023). For instance, their initial interviews will inevitably create a stronger impression, potentially leading to themes that emerge from them being overrepresented. Secondly, given the nature of semi-conducted interviews, there is an implied tradeoff between consistency across interviews and capturing the nuance of each individual's experience. To address these factors, the authors emphasised a neutral stance in the interview introduction. Furthermore, the same person was responsible for asking questions in the interviews to limit variability in tone and communication style.

4.5.2 Research Rigor

A key methodological consideration was the decision to focus on two firms. Choosing two firms allowed the authors to strike a balance: capturing firm-specific contextual depth while still identifying cross-case patterns. Had the study been limited to one firm, the ability to differentiate between individual-level mechanisms and firm-level cultural influences would have been constrained. On the other hand, a broader sampling across many firms would have risked superficiality and a dilution of context-specific meaning, especially given the complexity of motivational and identity dynamics.

The semi-structured questions enabled the authors to adapt and probe as themes emerged. However, it also introduces potential risks of interviewer influence or unintended leading elements in follow-up questions (Saunders et al., 2023). To mitigate these risks, the authors maintained a consistent interview structure. Finally, while the sample size is modest, the depth of engagement, with interviews averaging around 60 minutes, and some interviewees participating twice, supports the validity of the findings by allowing for an in-depth exploration of complex topics (Saunders et al., 2023).

4.6 Ethical Considerations and Implications

Each participant was provided with clear information about the study's purpose and anonymity and signed a digital GDPR-compliant consent form consistent with the guidelines of the Stockholm School of Economics. To ensure anonymity, neither names nor any personally identifiable or sensitive data are included in the final material. The written communication with the interviewees (See Appendix 4.), including the interview coordination and the GDPR consent form were sent individually to avoid an explosion of their participation. In addition, all interview recordings, transcriptions, and notes will be securely deleted upon the completion of the thesis, in line with ethical research standards. The authors explained the purpose of the study at the beginning of each interview, which together with the aforementioned measures aimed to create a respectful and safe space where participants could speak openly about their experiences.

In terms of broader ethical impact, there is a risk that the knowledge created could be used to influence individual motivation, and thereby their work contribution in a self-benefitting way. However, after critical reflection the risk is deemed as relatively low. To academia, the research contributes to an existing conversation on motivation, identity and mission without making normative claims about any specific organisational structure.

4.7 Usage of Artificial Intelligence

The usage of Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools is limited to maximise efficiency or accuracy in specific tasks:

- 1) ChatGPT was used to answer language-related questions including synonyms or rephrase existing sentences. However, no sentence generated by AI has been taken in its entirety.
- 2) Grammarly was used to correct language errors.
- 3) KlangAI was used to transcribe the interview recordings. To ensure accuracy, specific quotes were double-checked manually with the video recording.

5. Empirics

The empirical data is categorised into themes outlined in the extended SDT model: (1) *Autonomy*, (2) *Competence*, (3) *Relatedness*, (4) *Identity-Mission Alignment*. In turn, each broader theme consists of 1-4 second-order codes respectively.

5.1 Autonomy

5.1.1 Perceived Freedom at work

There is a high level of perceived freedom in the organisations in terms of the type of project and amount of work that the consultants take on, with sales being a shared responsibility and project distribution being informally decided based on availability, consultants' interest, experiences and skill development objectives. At both firms, employees are encouraged and expected to self-educate in areas of interest within the field of sustainability. In Firm B, each employee has access to an individual budget dedicated to skill-development, e.g. to sponsor a course.

“Of course we have that discussion about the long-term strategy as well, but a lot of it is really about what drives the individuals (...) Doing what you enjoy and hopefully becoming skilled at it means you can also attract clients. It's a win-win for the company.” - David

““In the beginning, I didn't fully understand how much value this organizational model with its freedom held. Now I can see how much the way of working contributes to me personally. Of course, my core drive to make a meaningful change is still at the center, but my appreciation for the freedom has grown, and it has become a bigger part of my motivation.” - Ben

5.1.2 Balancing tasks with varying appeal

At both firms, the work is divided into two categories: project delivery for external clients and unpaid internal work, such as administrative or marketing tasks. The internal tasks constitute a limitation on the time individuals can spend on developing their areas of interest or generating direct profit. The hours spent on them are not measured. However, the fairness in work distribution is described as mostly satisfactory.

“It's the projects we do that make a real difference. I don't quite feel the same about the internal work; it's more about things that just need to be done to keep the structure running. (...) You're not driven by that, but it's necessary to maintain the structure, which in turn allows us to work on the issues that we are driven by and that feel more meaningful.” - Hanna

“There's a sense that you're doing things together to maintain the quality of the work being delivered, and that requires an effort in internal tasks”- Jenny

5.1.3 Strong appreciation of freedom

Several consultants expressed valuing the freedom that comes from the partnership structure, with one interviewee making a comparison between freedom and financial reward.

“The partnership model is tied to our corporate structure—especially the freedom to control your own time. (...) Everyone here appreciates this setup, so we work collectively to preserve it. That's the model worth fighting for.” - Ian

“It makes a huge difference to be able to control your own working hours. If you were to translate that into salary, it would be worth a great deal.” - Joana

One employee who has experienced both the non-partnership based and the partnership structure at the same firm describes that switching over to the latter led to significant improvements in the engagement among employees for development, internal work and client acquisition.

“It became completely different. Before, people were like baby birds waiting to be fed; afterwards, it was like going out hunting together. It's night and day.” - Emma

5.2 Competence

5.2.1 Peer-based learning

Competence development occurs mainly through peer-based learning, with the consultants describing a high degree of internal knowledge-sharing and satisfaction with the competencies among their colleagues.

“It is really fun to have so many experiences in the group...I’ve absorbed knowledge from everyone and the learning curve is steep” - William

Three main methods of knowledge-sharing are identified within the firms. Firstly, recruitment constitutes an opportunity to use the external environment to fill knowledge gaps. Competencies could also be developed in-house. For instance, one or several consultants could be enrolled in a course, who will upon return educate the rest of the group. The third way of knowledge-transfer happens naturally through collaborating in the projects, usually in pairs. Firm A has a fourth method of using learning groups referred to as “noder”. These groups are formed in an ad hoc manner based on shared interest and client acquisition goals. It is expected to be in at least a few of the groups.

" We choose learning groups ourselves based on what skills we have and which ones we want to develop, it's an excellent way to develop skills and get incentive to contribute to service development, which we need to work continuously with for the firm to stay relevant, so it's also a question of how much responsibility one feel for the firm. " - Joanna

5.2.2 Unstructured Organisational Development

In both organisations, opportunities for discussions regarding competence development happen after each project in the project evaluation, and in the weekly (firm A), and respective monthly (firm B) meetings. Organisational learning and the internal work laying the foundation for it is described as a rather unstructured process without clear directions or strategy, which has caused some frustration, but has not materialized in significant conflicts.

“Sometimes someone needs to step up and take responsibility. We are very good at identifying tasks but still could happen that it does not get done. I think this should be improved. We shouldn’t work with the frustration that something should get done.” - Kevin

“We talk about wanting to develop internal capacities, but at the same time we don’t put enough time into resolving it.” - Adam

The sustainability consulting industry is described as highly dynamic. The consultants express awareness of potential investments that could be made to build long-term effectiveness in project delivery. However, due to the requirement of consensus, the group as an entity becomes more risk-averse when faced with significant investments. There emerged also a view that larger investments are not made because of the expectation that they will not be followed through if initiated.

“As of now, the principle of consensus is prioritized (...) It gets quite frustrating that everyone has to be involved in every decision, and we get stuck on unimportant issues, even though there’s general agreement on the strategic ones, it can be hard to execute the strategy.” - Fredrik

The onboarding process is described as somewhat confusing in terms of understanding what needs to be done, with a high responsibility for the consultant to proactively reach out for help and guidance.

“The beginning can be tricky. (...) One is expected to proactively raise issues in the weekly meetings or to one’s project partner. If more help is needed, one can talk to the CEO or another colleague”. - Elsa

5.2.3 Internal Feedback Systems

Currently, at both firms the evaluation is done after each project. At firm A where projects are predominantly performed in pairs, the consultants each give a number-based score to the other on the degree of successful project delivery. This score is documented and available for the rest of the group to see. Each consultant has their own competency matrix that they are responsible for updating annually, which is also available for the group to see. Generally, the peer-review is predominantly positive.

“I’m personally driven by freedom, but at the same time I sometimes feel that I lack clear expectations. So there’s a need for a clearer structure when it comes to development paths.

Overall, I'd say I have developed, but at times it's a bit hard to measure how that development has taken place." - Fredrik

While all negative feedback is described as uncomfortable to give and receive, feedback on skills related to sustainability are especially sensitive to bring up.

"We are not super pedagogical in dealing with clients. And that's the feedback we always seem to get. Honestly, I think everyone's okay with that - we're not teachers, that's not who we are. But on the other hand, if someone were to say: 'You're not exactly sharp at these climate calculations,' especially when you personally believe you are... That's different. You almost don't want to work there anymore. - Elsa

5.3 Relatedness

5.3.1 Egalitarian culture

The power distance is intentionally kept small between associate partners and co-owners. Although formally the owners are responsible for long-term strategic issues, the decision-making is described as highly democratic. One demonstration of this collective decision-making is that all employees can attend the job interview for a new consultant in firm A.

"It's motivating to be fully involved and participate in all discussions - you feel greater responsibility for the company's long-term development. Your own income and interests are tied to the company. The model and size help create this sense of responsibility." - Fredrik

"I've never felt that the CEO or the board has overruled me. There's a lot of bargaining power in the fact that it's our expertise that makes up the firm, we can choose to leave at any time." - Jerry

One consultant raised that the high involvement in decision-making could be a way of protecting one's interest in a context where everyone has dual-role of own and collective work identities. Discussions around alternative structures are generally "put on the shelf" when mentioned.

5.3.2 Community as the reason for joining

While the consultants have various reasons to start, most of the interviews highlighted the need for community as a main reason to join the partnership over working independently.

"Being an entrepreneur gives high individual freedom, but at the same time you don't want to be alone, you want colleagues, access to services, reference assignments, that you don't need to reinvent the wheel. Getting to work as self-employed in a structured format is the big driving factor. Both the freedom and the support in the shared structures, and the generous, unpretentious attitude that exists in the group." - David

Most consultants expressed a strong mutual reliance on each other. Furthermore, higher variety and better quality of projects are also highlighted as benefits of the model. Some projects are delivered collaboratively even if it only requires one person, as projects are described as trust-building tools and knowledge-sharing.

"One can feel a sense of safety to deliver something that one is not an expert in, since there is a broader range of competence. It can also be harder to sell a project as an individual consultant, and the firm's brand helps with it." - David

"We've built a culture where we genuinely care for one another, always ready to help and support, because we're deeply interdependent. The atmosphere is open and trusting. Over time, we've gotten better at noticing when someone needs help. We're a close-knit team, deeply aware of each other's situations." - Joanna

5.3.3 Professional nature of relationships

The consultants describe the internal relationships as highly professional rather than personal. Several consultants when comparing the relationships they had at their previous workplaces concluded that they were either equally close or closer on a personal level with their former colleagues.

“At my previous employer, I strongly identified with my workplace. But here, I don’t feel the same need for that kind of attachment. My sense of belonging is more about the company itself. People come and go, I’m not here for the individuals, but for the work we do together.” - Joanna

5.4 Identity-Mission Alignment

Formally, sustainability values are part of the recruitment criterias and company policies support these values through only allowing trains for business trips that are within reasonable distance. Informally, social interactions have also come to strengthen sustainability-related values, there is for example a tendency to justify behaviors that are not perceived as sustainable, for instance explaining to others that the meat is grass-fed or that the airline is a more climate-friendly one. For many, the perceived success with each project is defined as the sustainability impact it is able to achieve, rather than financial return.

“Sometimes we take on “non-profit-type” assignments where the hourly rate is lower, but people are often more eager to join those kinds of projects.” - Elsa

"I had already had strong, compatible values when I joined - we live in the world of sustainability which is a bit of our own bubble... there’s a discussion among colleagues about vegetarians, organic meat etc." - Joanna

“For us sustainability is not just a job, it’s also a lifestyle so I’ve become more sustainable, generally speaking” - Fredrik

6. Analysis

6.1 Formation of Self-Identity

6.1.1 Identity Regulation

One pattern identified in the empirics is that the consultants consistently identified with sustainability values. Notably, these values were described as growing in personal importance over time, which can be explained by the Identity Regulation Model (Alvesson et al. 2002). With identity regulation being the discursive and symbolic organisational practices that define ideal

behaviors and values, several regulatory mechanisms emerged from the empirics. One interviewee explained that the candidate's sustainability values were a question explicitly asked in the recruitment. As most employees participate in interviews as interviewers, this becomes a cue for the new and existing employees. There are also symbolic policies present at both firms, with practices such as vegetarian-only catering and restrictions on business travel by plane further communicating the organizational identity. Finally, the interviews showcased a recurring discourse of "making a difference" or "doing meaningful work", suggesting the presence of a shared story.

6.1.2 Identity Work

The empirics demonstrate that these aforementioned mechanisms prompt the consultants to engage in *identity work*, shown in their adaption and affirmation of sustainability as the central discourse (Alvesson et al. 2002). For instance, several consultants noted that although they had compatible values from the outset, they became "more sustainable" since they joined. Interestingly, a couple of consultants described that when making a decision that contradicted the ideal, e.g. flying or consuming red meat, they felt the need to justify to their colleagues that the meat was grass-fed, or that the unavailability of alternative transportation routes. These behaviours suggest that the firm mission acts as a moral reference point against which individuals desire to align themselves, representing a shift from external expectations to internalised responsibility.

6.1.3 Self-Identity

Over time, the model states that the continuous alignment creates a relatively stable but constantly evolving sense of self, which is illustrated by the observed phenomena where sustainability values extend beyond a professional focus to become a part of the consultant's border self-identity (Alvesson et al. 2002). This is reflected in statements such as "Sustainability is not just a job, it's a lifestyle." and "The main identity is that I am a sustainability consultant...." As social interactions constitute an inevitable part of an organisation's discursive practices, self-identities, once stabilized, feed back into the organisation as part of the discursive environment that regulates others. Thus, the construction of self-identity between is both a circular and a mutually influencing process.

6.2 Internalisation of Partnership Structure and Firm Mission

6.2.1 Sustainability as a Shared Value

As concluded from the analysis above, the self-identity rooted in sustainability values serves a dual purpose, both stabilising individual purpose and reinforcing collective norms. Hence, part of the sense of volition that the consultants describe, which corresponds to fulfillment of autonomy in SDT (Ryan and Deci 2000c), can be explained by not only structural freedom, but also by value congruence, where the sustainability aspect of the projects aligns with their intrinsic value. This intrinsic value also affects the fulfillment of competence, by shifting the very definition of “desirable outcome” of projects to center around its sustainability impact, explaining the empirical data that engagement is sustained even for the occasional low-paying research projects. Consequently, need satisfaction is facilitated as the sources from which competence needs can be fulfilled expand beyond formal validation, such as promotion or bonus.

Furthermore, the consultants described their colleagues as “likeminded,” and the group as “a bubble”, reflecting a value-driven community. This observation indicates that when collectively shared, sustainability becomes a mechanism for fulfilling the need for relatedness by fostering a sense of belonging (Ryan & Deci, 2000a). In turn, this collective purpose-based identity can explain why feedback on sustainability-related skills is often avoided. As these skills are integrated into the constructed self-identity, critiques can be experienced as a threat to the individual and collective identity.

Proposition 1: Self-identity becomes increasingly integrated with the shared mission, facilitating collaboration and enhancing work engagement.

6.2.2 Absence of Managerial Control

During the interviews, participants frequently expressed the value they saw in the freedom of the partnership structure. From the perspective of SDT (Ryan and Deci, 2000c), while sustainability is a required focus of the projects, the freedom could stem from the consultants being free to interpret this firm’s mission and base their projects on the chosen niche. Hence, the need for

autonomy, i.e. experiencing one's actions as self-endorsed, is highly satisfied by a direct absence of external coercion organisation structure.

Nonetheless, the same absence of centralised coordination has also led to experiences of ambiguity and insufficient feedback. Several consultants expressed a wish for more structured skill-development, particularly in the onboarding stage, reflecting a need to achieve the aspect within the competence of extending one's capabilities (Ryan & Deci, 2000b; Deci & Ryan, 2015). Notably, this frustration is not a trade-off between autonomy and competence, as there is no theoretical contradiction between autonomy and guidance, rather, the need for frustration in competence is more an inevitable consequence of the same organizational structure that yielded autonomy satisfaction (Ryan & Deci, 2006).

Another aspect of highly decentralised control is egalitarian and consensus-based decision-making. On one hand, the pursuit of consensus in decision-making processes creates inertia for strategic initiatives such as more significant long-term investments. From SDT's lens, as the competence-development value of these initiatives are acknowledged, the inertia will inevitably limit competence fulfillment (Deci & Ryan, 2000c). Nonetheless, an acceptance of this limitation is demonstrated. Despite consistently acknowledging the inertia, no interviewee expressed a wish to change the decision-making processes. Analysing the broader context of need fulfilment provides insights on this acceptance. The consultants express that the equal weight of their voice has resulted in a "motivating involvement", which fulfills autonomy by allowing individuals to experience agency through ownership over the outcomes that affect their work (Deci & Ryan, 2000c; Deci & Ryan, 2015). Moreover, while consensus is time-consuming, it limits the risk of dissatisfaction with decision outcomes, thus reducing the risk of relationship-harming disagreement and supporting relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000c; Deci & Ryan, 2000b).

Proposition 2: What's motivating is not complete need-fulfilment, but perceiving inefficiencies as voluntary trade-offs.

6.2.3 Coupling of Individual and Collective Outcome

The empirics illustrate several demonstrations of the tensions between individual and collective outcomes. While the motivation for performing project work could be explained by both sustainability-rooted values and financial incentives, the motivation of performing unpaid, less personally meaningful internal tasks is unexplainable in isolation. Nonetheless, SDT's lens suggests that these internal tasks have undergone internalization, showcased by the fact that individuals endorse the importance of performing them in order to facilitate meaningful project work (Deci & Ryan, 2000c). Thus, although these tasks feel less volitional in isolation, when studied in the larger organization context, they remain autonomy-supportive, indicating that autonomy is shaped by contextual trade-offs and negotiation of needs within the system.

However, as internal work and the high prevalence of knowledge-sharing are unpaid but beneficial for all, the need for autonomy is insufficient to explain the low degree of free-riding. However, considering the need for relatedness could provide insight through viewing these actions as relationship-building and prosocial behaviour. The fulfilment of relatedness is enhanced by the reciprocity and social support described by the consultants, which has likely led to higher trust in the collective goodwill, further motivating one's own contribution (Ryan & Deci, 2000a). This need for fulfillment in regards to the integrated interests could explain the internalisation of the partnership structure, indicated by consultants expressing that the partnership has come to make up for an increasing proportion of their motivation to stay.

Proposition 3: Tension between individual and collective interests can be resolved through the fulfilment of the basic needs.

7. Discussion

7.1 Answer to Research Question

Empirical data from 17 interviewees from two professional services partnership firms have been analyzed with the purpose of answering the research question:

What are the mechanisms that shape individuals' motivation to engage in and remain as partners within professional partnerships?

Based on the analysis, the explanation is rooted in three key findings:

Proposition 1: Self-identity becomes increasingly integrated with the shared mission facilitating collaboration and enhancing work engagement.

Proposition 2: What's motivating is not complete need-fulfilment, but perceiving minor need frustration as voluntary trade-offs.

Proposition 3: Tension between individual and collective interests can be resolved through the fulfilment of the basic needs.

7.2 Contribution to Existing Research and Practical Implications

In terms of Proposition 1, while SDT (Ryan and Deci 2000c) explains *why* consultants are motivated to work with the sustainability projects using need fulfilment, the Identity Regulation model (Alvesson et al. 2002) contributes to explain *how* this alignment is continuously constructed, sustained, and reinforced. Thus to deepen the understanding of internalization in SDT, while the focus is still on the individual process, social factors that impact this individual process are considered. This conclusion directly provides empirical support for the unresolved internalization process in the study of Van Tuin et al. (2020) who used SDT corporate purpose's enhancement on motivation. Drawing upon the logic of Hinings et al. (2015) who identified the firm itself as a context where professional identities are mediated, formed and transformed, the finding provides an alternative angle on the connection in research between identity development and motivation established by La Guardia (2009). While La Guardia's research treats identity development as enabled by need satisfaction, and thus an outcome of it, the findings of this study show that once formed, self-identity feeds back into the work context as a driving force for motivation.

Furthermore, Proposition 2. contributes to the existing application of SDT, by providing an additional, dynamic angle on need frustrations as autonomously accepted trade-offs aligned with goals more meaningful to the idea of self. A practical contribution of the research finding stems from Proposition 3, where the empirical data suggest several potential ways in which through need satisfaction, high engagement in partnership structures could still be achieved despite some requirements for the individual to sacrifice short-term personal gains. With many consultants describing autonomy as rewarding and one interviewee directly comparing it with income, it could be treated as a “motivational currency” in the cost-benefit analysis performed by any entrepreneurs who might be considering entering a similar partnership.

7.3 Limitations of the study

One limitation of the study is that in practice, extrinsic and intrinsic drivers or rewards might not be completely separable. For instance, in this case it's important to consider that as co-owners and consultants have similar levels of monetary reward and influence in the company, the structural mechanisms have to a large extent eliminated the potential reward of self-benefiting behaviours. Furthermore, while the internal environment is egalitarian, there could be reputational benefits stemming externally from having the role of co-owner. The implication from this limitation is that while need fulfilment is essential to understand pro-social behaviours in partnerships, and have significant explanatory power to motivation, behaviours might not exclusively stem from either one of extrinsic rewards or inherent values, but a complex and integrated combination.

7.4 Future research

As motivated in the methodology, in-depth, qualitative interviews focused on individual experiences aligned with the research aim of targeting individual-level. However, for more generalised findings and studies on causation, quantitative large-sample studies could be utilised. Furthermore, as the research was somewhat context-specific, it could be interesting to study other contexts using the same framework. This would potentially highlight other aspects of an individual's professional identity than sustainability values emerging from the empirical data of this study.

8. Practical Implications

This section explores the practical implications of the study's findings and translates them into actionable, stakeholder-specific recommendations, following three main findings, i.e. propositions outlined in the discussion.

- 1) Self-identity becomes increasingly integrated with the shared mission, facilitating collaboration and enhancing work engagement.
- 2) Minor inefficiencies or frustrations are accepted when experienced as voluntary trade-offs.
- 3) Tensions between individual and collective goals are resolved through the fulfillment of basic psychological needs.

Practical implications are discussed from the lens of the three most relevant stakeholder groups, considering their ethical responsibility and real-world concerns:

1. Partners in small, peer-governed professional partnerships
2. Managers or partners in large or hybrid professional service firms
3. Entrepreneurs considering joining a partnership

8.1 Proposition 1: Self-identity becomes increasingly integrated with the shared mission, facilitating collaboration and enhancing work engagement

8.1.1 Partners in Small, Peer-Governed Professional Partnerships

As demonstrated in the empirics, identity-mission alignment can be an effective tool for shaping behaviour and engagement. Therefore, this stakeholder group could consider implementing mission-congruent rituals such as onboarding processes and storytelling forums that link project work to the firm's broader purpose, such as environmental or social impact. Rather than relying on passive value signalling, partners should realise that internal discourse has the potential to actively foreground purpose through communication, symbolic policies, and how client engagements are framed. To maintain this alignment over time, re-anchoring sessions such as retreats or project retrospectives could be scheduled.

Ethical Considerations

While identity alignment can boost motivation, it must not become a covert tool for conformity. In small firms, the risk is especially high that implicit moral pressure leads to homogeneity. Leaders must ensure that identity regulation remains inclusive, allowing space for diverse and personal variation and interpretation. In other words, alignment should emerge through authentic resonance, not subtle coercion.

8.1.2 Managers in Large or Hybrid Professional Service Firms

In larger or more formalized PSFs, structures for identity–mission alignment will need to be scalable. This includes integrating purpose into processes such as onboarding, leadership messaging, mentorship, and performance frameworks. To replicate the motivational benefits of smaller units on a larger scale, managers could encourage values-based micro-communities such as practice groups or employee resource groups tied to the firm’s mission.

Ethical Considerations

Large firms are at risk of “identity washing”, i.e. showing values without meaningfully enacting them. To avoid this, identity initiatives can be supported by feedback loops that capture how values are actually experienced in daily work. For example, surveys could be sent out to gather feedback on “Do you feel the company’s stated values reflect your daily experience?” and “Can you give an example where the company lived, or failed to live its mission?” Listening to employees’ interpretations and adjusting accordingly is key to avoiding performative branding.

8.1.3 Entrepreneurs Considering Joining a Partnership

For entrepreneurs evaluating partnership opportunities, understanding early cultural signals is vital. Observing how the team talks about itself, makes decisions, and frames its purpose can reveal the likelihood of future identity alignment. These cues, often embedded in informal discourse, reflect the organization’s identity-regulating dynamics (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). Knowing the effect that mission-identity alignment will have on their work engagement, and thus affect their wellbeing at work, prospective partners should consider whether the firm’s mission genuinely aligns with their evolving self-concept, and whether the culture leaves room for their growth.

Ethical Considerations

Joining a partnership also means shaping its collective identity. This calls for reflective intentionality. Firstly, individuals should understand not only what the firm's identity enables, but also what it might limit. Secondly, they should recognise their own influence, and thereby responsibility in how they shape others' engagement.

8.2 Proposition 2: What's motivating is not complete need-fulfilment, but perceiving minor need frustration as voluntary trade-offs

8.2.1 Partners in Small, Peer-Governed Professional Partnerships

The empirics showed that in flat, decentralized partnerships, inefficiencies, such as strategic inertia or ambiguous onboarding can often occur as an unintended byproduct of the structure. However, such friction does not necessarily undermine motivation, provided that they are interpreted as freely chosen and meaningful. Through regular collective reflection, such as team retrospectives or process feedback sessions, partners can reinterpret frustrations as conscious trade-offs for valued autonomy and non-hierarchical collaboration. This framing aligns with SDT's emphasis on volition as a core component of motivation. Moreover, while the flatness of the structure should be preserved, firms can introduce lightweight, voluntary micro-structures, such as peer mentoring, onboarding buddies, or informal skill-sharing circles, that allow individuals to opt into support without compromising their sense of autonomy. These tools can help address competence-related frustrations without reverting to top-down systems.

Ethical Considerations

While the goal is to create an environment where individuals can interpret constraints as self-chosen and purpose-aligned, it is important not to mask systemic dysfunction as empowerment. If trade-offs are perceived as inescapable or if social norms discourage critique, the sense of autonomy is undermined. Partners must ensure that trade-offs remain genuinely voluntary and open to revision.

8.2.2 Managers in Large or Hybrid Professional Service Firms

In larger firms, minor frustration can often arise from rigid structures, bureaucratic constraints, or intense client demands. Rather than attempting to eliminate all friction, managers should surface and discuss these points openly. This can be achieved through structured feedback mechanisms, one-on-one meetings, and team reflections that can help employees frame certain challenges, like travel requirements or delayed promotions, as part of a longer-term developmental or autonomy-supporting trajectory. Additionally, bounded flexibility can be provided within a certain structure to increase perceived control and mitigate frustration, such as allowing consultants to choose between project types, learning paths, or work settings.

Ethical Considerations

Autonomy must be real, not purely rhetorical. Offering choices that are only superficial or constrained by hidden pressures risks backfiring, leading to disengagement, distrust in the long-term and risking to harm employee well-being.

8.2.3 Entrepreneurs Considering Joining a Partnership

For prospective partners, motivation will depend in part on how well they tolerate ambiguity and friction common in partnership-based structures. Flat governance, diffuse responsibilities, and slower decision-making are often byproducts of autonomy-maximizing models. Entrepreneurs should reflect honestly on whether these dynamics are energizing or draining for them personally. The research finding provided an alternative perspective to view autonomy and mission alignment as components of compensation. When individuals factor in the value of meaningful work, time flexibility, and shared ownership, they may be better able to accept other limitations without demotivation and make more informed decisions in line with the work conditions they want.

Ethical Considerations

While reframing can aid motivation, entrepreneurs should avoid over-rationalizing dysfunction as freedom, as not all inefficiencies are benign. Trade-offs should be evaluated critically on whether they align with personal values and well-being, or if they are avoidable structural

weaknesses. Maintaining this awareness supports both self-protection and constructive contribution to organizational development.

8.3 Proposition 3: Tension between individual and collective interests can be resolved through the fulfilment of the basic needs

8.3.1 Partners in Small, Peer-Governed Professional Partnerships

In small partnerships where task variability is low between the partners, tension can surface when tasks critical to organizational functioning, such as internal development work or knowledge sharing, lack visibility or immediate personal benefit. Firms should identify ways to enable individuals to experience collective engagement as personally meaningful and rewarding. One approach is to reward relational and invisible contributions, not necessarily with financial incentives but through structured recognition, such as public appreciation, symbolic awards, or personal development opportunities, for roles like mentoring, project coordination, or community building. These actions, while not always externally visible, contribute to strengthening the collective fulfillment of competence and relatedness needs. Additionally, building collaborative learning infrastructures, like informal peer coaching, internal workshops, or knowledge-sharing platforms, can align the pursuit of individual skill development with collective advancement.

Ethical Considerations

While need-fulfilling environments can harmonize interests, it is important not to overlook conflicts when they occur. Some degree of difference in commitment, energy, and values is inevitable and should not be stigmatized. Neither should those who prioritize their own growth be shamed as selfish. Ensuring equitable role rotation and distributing internal responsibilities structurally, rather than relying solely on goodwill or peer pressure, can prevent imbalances and emotional strain. Normalizing open dialogue around fairness and workload also reduces the risk of quiet resentment undermining collaboration. Psychological safety requires not only shared values but permission to voice when interests misalign.

8.3.2 Managers in Large or Hybrid Professional Service Firms

In larger firms, the interplay between individual and collective interests is often more complex. Employees are embedded in layered systems with varying incentives, team structures, and visibility of work. It can be difficult to distinguish true misalignment from mere misunderstandings of each other's roles. Still, the core logic of this proposition applies. Managers can foster alignment by acknowledging and rewarding contributions that serve both personal development and the wider organization, such as mentoring junior staff, leading internal projects, or sharing expertise across departments. These actions can be built into formal recognition systems, performance reviews, or internal career tracks that highlight growth through contribution.

Equally important is investing in systems that allow individuals to grow while contributing: learning platforms, cross-functional project opportunities, and peer-based feedback mechanisms all serve this dual purpose. When employees feel they can develop competence and strengthen relationships through contribution, not in spite of it, the boundary between self-interest and collective good begins to dissolve in accordance with the proposition.

Ethical Considerations

In large firms, risks emerge when employees are socially or structurally rewarded only for outward-facing, billable, or competitive contributions. If internal collaboration, peer mentoring, or community-building go unnoticed, employees may feel pressured to choose between visibility and value. Furthermore, excessive emphasis on harmony may discourage speaking up when structural demands conflict with individual goals. Leaders must ensure that the pursuit of integration does not result in the silencing of misfit or dissent. Authentic alignment arises when individuals are encouraged to navigate tensions honestly, not when conflict is buried under performative unity.

8.3.3 Entrepreneurs Considering Joining a Partnership

For those evaluating whether to join a partnership, this proposition highlights the importance of finding firms where contributing to the group feels like an extension of one's own ambition. From a relatedness perspective, candidates should look for visible signs of mutual support and

interdependence, shared internal work, active peer assistance, and a norm of collective rather than individual success. These dynamics indicate that relatedness is not just spoken about but practiced, which increases the likelihood that personal and collective motivation will reinforce each other. From a competence perspective, entrepreneurs should assess whether the partnership allows for sustained growth through feedback, stretch opportunities, and shared learning, not just autonomy and belonging. Finally, prospective partners should critically assess whether the trade-offs required by the partnership are aligned with their values and development. Partnerships that demand constant self-sacrifice or emotional labor for unclear or inconsistent collective benefit may compromise well-being, even if they outwardly promote mission alignment.

Ethical Considerations

Over-identification with the collective can blur personal boundaries and lead to burnout or self-suppression. Entrepreneurs should remain vigilant as to whether their contributions are reciprocated and whether their growth is supported. A healthy partnership, following the lens of the SDT model, should aim to satisfy the individuals' needs in the collaboration, not to dissolve them into the collective. Protecting one's sense of agency, and recognising the difference between mutuality rather than martyrdom, is essential for long-term sustainability and psychological resilience.

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10. Appendix

9.1 Appendix 1. Interview Questions Translated into English

Partnership Structure

1. How long have you worked here?
2. Can you tell me how you first came into contact with the partnership and what motivated you to join the partnership?
3. What does the compensation and profit-sharing mechanism look like?
4. What does decision-making and collaboration look like internally?
5. Is there internal work beyond client-facing tasks? How is the internal work distributed?
6. What would you say are the main advantages and disadvantages of the way the partnership is structured?
7. What is the reason for bringing in new members? What are the criteria for doing so?
8. How has the partnership changed or developed during the time you've been with the firm?
9. How do you experience the difference between being a consultant and a co-owner?
10. Can you describe how a typical project unfolds from the first client contact to the delivery of the result and the distribution of profit, and how you divide responsibilities and tasks along the way?
11. What are the contingencies, if any, between you and the others in your work
12. Who is responsible for making long-term strategic decisions? And in what contexts are those made?
13. How do you think about balancing purpose, interest, and financial gain in the assignments you choose?

General Questions Regarding Motivation

1. When you feel particularly motivated, what's driving that motivation?
2. Is your motivation to start the same as your motivation to stay? If not, what has changed?
3. What do you think is crucial for you to stay motivated in the long term?
4. What do you find most meaningful or rewarding in your work?

Autonomy

1. Does it affect you not to have a formal manager, if so, how?
2. How much agency do you have in your work and in choosing which projects you take on?
3. Is there any part of your work that feels relatively less meaningful or important compared to others, but that you still need to carry out?
4. How often do you get projects that you actually want?

Competence

1. Have you developed as much as you would want to in terms of competence?
2. Do you give each other feedback?
3. What exact evaluation criteria are used for project evaluation?
4. Are there any specific mechanisms within the collective that strengthen your sense of competence?
5. What kind of support did you receive in the beginning, especially since you might not have had a client base at that point?
6. What is it generally like to bring up more sensitive topics or give negative feedback? Are there certain subjects that are particularly difficult to raise?
7. What is the process for joining one of the learning groups?
8. What mechanisms are in place for knowledge sharing?

Relatedness

1. Do you feel that everyone in the collective contributes equally? How does that affect your motivation?
2. Considering that everyone is self-employed, how are conflicting interests handled and how do you work toward common goals?
3. How would you describe the relationships between you and the others at the firm?
4. How are disagreements resolved if they occur?

Identity-Mission Alignment

1. How would you describe the type of person who would thrive here?

2. What kind of stories or language are used internally to talk about “success” or “impact”?
3. When you think about how the organization describes its values or mission, do you see yourself in that picture?
4. How would you describe your professional identity today, and how did it come to be?
5. What does it mean to you to be part of this collective partnership?

9.2 Appendix 2. Overview of Conducted Interviews

Code name	Company	Date	Duration (min)
Daniel	A	2025-03-27	61
William	A	2025-03-28	79
Ian	A	2025-03-31	62
Elsa	A	2025-03-31	60
Andrea	A	2025-04-01	60
Joana	A	2025-04-01	61
Hanna	A	2025-04-01	60
Jenny	A	2025-04-02	59
Joana	A	2025-04-04	60
Ian	A	2025-04-04	35
Fredrik	A	2025-04-11	60
Kevin	A	2025-04-14	75
Jemy	B	2025-04-15	70
Adam	B	2025-04-16	60
Maria	B	2025-04-16	61
Maria	B	2025-04-28	13
Joana	A	2025-04-28	16
Andrea	A	2025-04-29	21
Jemy	B	2025-04-29	25
Fredrik	A	2025-04-29	18
Hanna	A	2025-04-29	15
Elsa	A	2025-04-30	22
Emma	A	2025-05-02	61
David	B	2025-05-02	55
Jenny	A	2025-05-05	15
Adam	B	2025-05-06	23
Ben	B	2025-05-07	30
Erik	B	2025-05-09	30

Average duration (min)

45

9.3 Appendix 3. Company Description

This description applies to both Company A and Company B, which were interviewed:

- Size: 0-50 Employees.
- Organisation structure: All employees are active consultants, of which a significant proportion are co-owners. There is a formal board and CEO, but decision-making power is distributed evenly, with CEO being a rather “administrative” role.
- Sector: Sustainability Consulting.
- Example of projects: Sustainability training, Climate calculations.
- Location: Based in Stockholm.

9.4 Appendix 4. Email Template to Potential Respondents

Dear (Recipient's Name),

I hope this message finds you well. My name is Joseph Hao, and I am a final-year student at the Stockholm School of Economics. Together with my thesis partner, I am currently writing our bachelor thesis in Management, where we are studying organizational structures in partnership-driven firms.

Our research focuses on understanding the motivational mechanisms that drive individuals to form and remain in professional partnerships, particularly in organizations where governance is decentralized and decision-making is shared among partners rather than led by a central CEO or traditional management hierarchy.

Based on our understanding, (Company Name) may align with this structure, and we would be truly grateful for the opportunity to speak with your partners or team members. A short call at your convenience would greatly help us understand how your organization operates in practice.

Please don't hesitate to contact me if you have any questions or would like more information. We would be deeply appreciative of your contribution and are happy to accommodate your availability.

Warm regards,

Joseph Hao and Elicia He

Bachelor Students in Business & Economics

Stockholm School of Economics