

Bubble Hopping in Organisations

A Contemporary Practice for Cross-Boundary Interaction

A Qualitative Study of How Bubble Hopping Is Designed and Experienced in Swedish Consumer Organisations

BSc Thesis in Retail Management

Stockholm School of Economics

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Abstract

As organisations confront mounting pressure to work across silos, many are turning to cross-boundary initiatives that aim to increase understanding across departments, collaboration and ultimately business performance. One emerging concept is “bubble hopping”: the practice of stepping outside one’s own organisational “bubble”, such as a role, department, or function, to engage with others whose perspectives differ. While the practice is gaining traction, little is known about how it is designed and experienced. This study investigates how bubble hopping initiatives are structured and what drives their perceived success, drawing on 17 semi-structured interviews with employees, HR professionals, and managers across Swedish consumer-oriented firms. It identifies eight initiative types, ranging from informal peer visits to formal cross-functional programs. Success was shaped not only by structure, but by the alignment of initiative design, employee mindset, and organisational support. Immersive formats and leadership visibility foster engagement, while time pressure, unclear role relevance, and emotional discomfort often inhibit participation. Theoretically, this study addresses a gap in boundary spanning and perspective-taking literature by introducing bubble hopping as a contemporary organisational practice that integrates the two concepts. It moves beyond informational accounts of boundary work by highlighting its emotional and relational dimensions, and offers a more nuanced understanding of how perspective-taking unfolds across roles and operational contexts. Practically, the findings offer actionable insights for organisations seeking to strengthen internal connections through everyday mechanisms that bridge divides and build organisational empathy.

Key words: *Bubble hopping, boundary spanning, cross-functional understanding, perspective-taking, organisational learning, social identity*

Acknowledgements: We warmly and sincerely thank Micael Dahlén for his invaluable support throughout, emvehå! We also express our thankfulness to Emma Stenström for her inspiration to explore bubble hopping in the first place and to Sara Rosengren for her guidance. Finally, we wish to thank all participants for sharing their time, experiences and engagement with us.

Supervisor: Micael Dahlén

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1. Introduction

In an era of increasingly diverse workplaces (Ernst & Yip, 2009), siloed departments, and record-low employee engagement (Gallup, 2024), does it make sense for organisations to be led without a holistic perspective? In both work and life, we navigate in bubbles: social, professional, and cognitive spheres that shape how we think, act, and who we interact with. These bubbles help us focus, but they can also isolate us. In complex organisations, that isolation becomes costly; siloed departments are becoming increasingly more prevalent where 83% of companies report having siloed divisions, and 97% state that silos negatively impact performance (De Waal et al., 2019). For instance, a customer service representative may never interact with supply chain planners, and logistics staff may lack understanding of how marketing shapes product flows.

These examples illustrate how bubbles form in organisations, often weakening cohesion and performance. While cross-boundary interaction is not a novel idea, few executives believe they are currently effective at working across boundaries (Yip et al., 2016).

Against this backdrop, *bubble hopping* emerges as a deceptively simple idea with powerful implications. It refers to stepping outside one's own bubble, be it a job function, department, or social group, to connect with others across boundaries (Stenström, 2023). The practice has gained strong cultural traction in Sweden, introduced as a new word (Nyordslistan, 2023) after being popularised by the researcher Emma Stenström. Her book *Bubble Hopping: A Method for Understanding Others* was awarded the HR Book of the Year with the motivation that it offers a practical tool to increase understanding and overcome divides in companies, organisations and society (Sveriges HR Förening, 2024). Striving to develop deeper understanding, empathy and creative insight, leaders increasingly implement and utilise the practice (Arthur D. Little, 2024; Stenström, 2023; Stockholm School of Economics Executive Education, 2025).

As the concept gains traction, organisations are not only experimenting with bubble hopping but increasingly seeking guidance on how to implement it effectively. This creates a demand for practical insight: What does successful bubble hopping look like in practice, and how can

it be designed to support organisational goals and diverse roles? These questions form the basis of this study, which explores how bubble hopping is structured and what factors shape its perceived success. In doing so, it offers actionable insights for organisations striving to foster more connected and collaborative ways of working.

1.1. Background

In response to the aforementioned internal silos, many organisations have introduced forms of experiential and human-centered practices aimed at fostering connections across roles, identities and functions. Initiatives such as job shadowing, peer mentoring, employee rotation, and more immersive formats like cross-functional leadership programs are increasingly used to broaden perspectives and encourage relational understanding (Hill et al., 2021; Inner Development Goals, 2024; Stenström, n.d.).

To understand how these practices are used and with what perceived success, we conducted a pre-study with three HR/People and Culture managers from different Swedish consumer-oriented firms. Through open, unstructured conversations, we explored how the topic is understood in practice and assessed its relevance. Insights from the pre-study helped refine our research scope and inform the subsequent data collection. In the pre-study, the managers described current cross-boundary initiatives, ranging from store immersion to peer-matching, but noted that their effectiveness varied, and implementation was often inconsistent or under-resourced. Combined with the typical structural fragmentation of consumer-oriented companies – spanning production, head office, and retail (Merchant & Van der Stede, 2017) – further reinforced the decision to focus this study on such organisations, where operational diversity and physical distance frequently amplify internal boundaries.

To investigate these practices more systematically, we ground our study in existing theories that help explain how individuals interact across organisational boundaries. Bubble hopping, while highly practical in its nature, roots itself in theoretical concepts from social psychology, particularly *social identity* which refers to how individuals define themselves in relation to group memberships (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), and in *perspective-taking*, the active cognitive process of imagining oneself in another's shoes to understand their visual viewpoint, thoughts, motivations, intentions, and/or emotions (Ku et al., 2015). Furthermore, in

organisations, bubble hopping is understood as *boundary spanning*: roles and behaviours that connect individuals across organisational lines (Tushman & Scanlan, 1981).

Building on these insights, this study focuses on individual, cross-boundary interactions within consumer-oriented organisations, serving as a foundational mechanism for organisational learning and cohesion. Thus, in the context of this research, bubble hopping is defined as *stepping outside one's own bubble and meeting someone from another – someone whose background, knowledge, practices, or beliefs differ from one's own*. More specifically, it refers to *how individuals from different departments, who do not typically interact in their daily work, are enabled to meet and exchange perspectives*.

1.2 Purpose and Contribution

The purpose of this study is twofold. Firstly, it seeks to examine how bubble hopping initiatives are structured, implemented, and sustained within organisational contexts. Secondly, it aims to explore the factors that influence the perceived success of these initiatives, with particular attention to the perspectives of both the leaders who design them and the employees who participate in them. These purposes are addressed through a qualitative research design based on semi-structured interviews.

This study contributes both theoretically and practically. Theoretically, this study contributes by addressing the underexplored intersection of boundary spanning and perspective-taking in the design and lived experience of structured cross-boundary initiatives. It also adds to the understanding of how individual and organisational enablers jointly shape cross-boundary participation across roles and contexts. Practically, the study provides actionable guidance on how to design and implement cross-boundary initiatives that align with strategic priorities, employee readiness, and organisational context, clarifying the why, what, who, when, and how of making such initiatives effective.

1.3. Research Questions

In alignment with the identified purpose and contribution, the following research questions guide this thesis:

RQ1: How do consumer-oriented organisations design and implement bubble hopping initiatives across organisational units?

RQ2: What factors influence the perceived success of bubble hopping initiatives in consumer-oriented organisations according to leaders and employees?

1.4. Delimitation

Insights from a pre-study revealed that Human Resources (HR) departments are often responsible for initiating and managing cross-boundary initiatives, while office and frontline employees are typically the intended participants. Based on this, the study focuses on three perspectives of Swedish consumer-oriented companies: HR employees, office-based employees, and frontline staff, referred to as employees working in operational roles, such as store personnel. Sweden was chosen as the geographical focus to enable in-depth, context-sensitive insights within the time and resource frame of this thesis. By limiting the scope to one national context and a select number of companies, the study prioritises depth over breadth. The aim is not to generalise across all industries or countries, but to generate rich, exploratory insights that can inform future comparative and quantitative research.

1.5 Disposition

The study is organised into six main chapters. The introduction establishes the background, relevance, and purpose of the study, including the research questions and delimitations. The theoretical framework reviews existing literature, particularly boundary spanning and perspective-taking, and positions bubble hopping as a contemporary organisational practice through which these concepts are explored. The methodology chapter outlines the qualitative research design, including sampling, data collection, and the analytical strategies employed. The empirical findings present the results in relation to the two research questions. The discussion chapter interprets these findings and identifies where they extend and contradict existing theory. Managerial implications are also outlined in the discussion. Lastly, the conclusion summarises the thesis and reflects on its theoretical implications, limitations, and directions for future research.

2. Theoretical framework

This theoretical framework provides the conceptual foundation for answering the research questions. It draws on literature from organisational theory and social psychology and is organised into four thematic areas: *Boundaries and Social Identities in Organisations*, *Designing Cross-Boundary Practices*, *Individual Enablers of Cross-Boundary Initiatives*, and *Organisational Enablers of Cross-Boundary Initiatives*. The section concludes by identifying a key research gap. Namely, the limited empirical understanding of how structured cross-boundary initiatives are designed and experienced by employees, and how individual and organisational factors interact to shape their perceived success.

2.1 Boundaries and Social Identities in Organisations

Boundaries are a basic aspect of organisational life (Ernst & Yip, 2009). Traditionally, five types of boundaries are recognised: vertical, horizontal, stakeholder, demographic, and geographic. However, more recent studies emphasise that the most salient boundaries today are often psychological, emotional, and identity-based (Cross et al., 2013). At the core of these identity-based boundaries lies social identity, which is shaped by factors such as educational background, generational affiliation, and job level, influencing how individuals perceive themselves and others at work (Ernst & Yip, 2009). Since groups that have historically remained separate are increasingly working together, there is a growing need for bridging, not only structural boundaries, but also social identity boundaries in service of larger organisational vision, mission or goals (ibid).

2.2 Designing Cross-Boundary Practices

Significant research explores how to overcome boundaries in organisations, proposing a range of practices to foster interaction and cohesion across roles and units. While several frameworks exist, they vary in focus and often leave key empirical questions unanswered.

From an organisation-wide perspective, De Waal et al. (2019) identify five silo-busting factors that shape internal collaboration outcomes: values, collaborative operating models, collaborative environments, leadership, and people reward and development. Particularly, values and reward mechanisms emerged as the strongest predictors of collaboration success.

This indicates that, when designing cross-boundary practices, organisations should not only articulate internal collaboration as a core value but also actively reinforce it by recognising and rewarding collaborative behaviour.

Building on this foundation, other scholars propose more specific tactics to foster interaction across boundaries. For example, Ernst and Yip (2009) suggest leadership tactics to bridge social identity divides, for which three are: *suspending* intergroup differencing by creating neutral interaction spaces, referred to as “Ba” (Nonaka & Konno, 1998), *reframing* a shared superordinate identities and *nesting* subgroup roles within broader organisational goals.

Cross et al. (2013) extend the perspective on boundary spanning leadership with six practices aimed at supporting organisational change, emphasising that boundaries are not just structural but deeply rooted in identity and interpersonal dynamics. Several emphasise leadership as a central actor, but leaves opportunities to explore how such identity dynamics are experienced from the perspective of non-leaders.

Elaborating on the role of interactions in sharing knowledge across boundaries, Nonaka (1994) describes the concept of *socialisation*. This is a process in which individuals “indwell” in each other’s lived realities to gain an insider perspective and is particularly important to share tacit knowledge which cannot be codified or transmitted through formal instructions but must be acquired through shared experience (Al-Zoubi et al., 2022; Argote & Ingram, 2000; Nonaka, 1994). This underscores the importance of designing cross-boundary initiatives that go beyond information sharing, enabling repeated, immersive interaction across roles and units.

In designing cross-boundary practices, other researchers shift focus to HR-based enablers. Wirtz and Jerger (2016), for example, recommend tools such as job rotation and joint training for service employees. Liu and Meyer (2020) similarly describe how collaborative human resource management (HRM) and informal social interaction materialise boundary spanning. While offering valuable insights, both these studies are context-specific, leaving questions about how HRM practices are experienced across different internal operational settings.

Further insight on how to design cross-boundary interaction comes from *intergroup contact theory*, identifying that equal status, shared goals, voluntariness, the absence of competition

and sanctioned authority are suitable conditions for intergroup contact. (Pettigrew et al., 2011). While highly relevant, this framework stems from social psychology and has rarely been applied to internal organisational initiatives.

A final and particularly thought-provoking contribution comes from Leicht-Deobald et al. (2025), who hypothesised that boundary management would be most effective when carried out by team members, due to their operational proximity and stronger relational networks. Yet, their meta-analysis found that leaders were actually more effective in managing boundaries. This surprising result highlights an unresolved question in the literature: who should carry out boundary-spanning?

Taken together, these studies offer valuable insights but leave several important questions open regarding the design of cross-boundary initiatives. In particular, little is known about how these practices are perceived and experienced across different roles and operational contexts. While existing frameworks emphasise values, leadership tactics, HRM practices, suitable intergroup contact conditions and immersive learning formats, their translation into concrete initiative-level design remains underexplored.

2.3 Individual Enablers of Cross-Boundary Initiatives

One of the most central individual-level capabilities enabling cross-boundary interaction is perspective-taking. Factors related to both cognitive capacity and motivation determine the extent to which individuals engage in perspective-taking (Ku et al., 2015). In other words, individuals must be both able and willing to consider another person's perspective.

Employees are more likely to adopt others' perspectives when they understand how their role fits into the larger system. This is referred to as *integrated understanding* (Ku et al., 2015; Parker & Axtell, 2001; Batson et al., 1996). Further, a greater sense of accountability toward tasks outside an employee's immediate responsibilities, described as *flexible role orientation*, is also associated with increased perspective-taking (Parker & Axtell, 2001). Building on this, *job autonomy*, the extent to which an employee has control over various aspects, is an important predictor of both integrated understanding and flexible role orientation (ibid). These insights point to that perspective-taking is enabled by an intricate combination of individual traits and organisational decisions, creating opportunities for further exploration.

Conversely, certain conditions inhibit this cognitive process. Time pressure, cognitive load, and low working memory can prevent individuals from investing the mental energy required to consider others' viewpoints (Ku et al., 2015). Supporting this, Škerlavaj et al. (2018) show that time pressure leads employees to focus narrowly on their tasks while disregarding the needs of others.

Beyond cognitive enablers, there are factors relating to motivation and willingness. Here, it is found that individuals with interpersonal characteristics, such as *prosocial motivation and emotional intelligence*, are more inclined to take the perspectives of others (Ku et al., 2015).

While the research on antecedents to perspective-taking is insightful, researchers call for more integration between lessons from both the social psychological and management traditions (Ku et al., 2015). Indeed, while previous research outlines cognitive and motivational enablers of perspective-taking, it offers limited insight into how these factors influence participation in structured cross-boundary initiatives.

2.4 Organisational Enablers of Cross-Boundary Initiatives

In addition to individual willingness and ability, the broader organisational context plays a critical role in materialising boundary spanning (Liu & Meyer, 2020).

One organisational enabler is *Ba*, which refers to a shared space that serves as a foundation for knowledge creation (Nonaka & Konno, 1998). *Ba* can be physical (e.g., a shared workplace), virtual (e.g., digital platforms), or mental (e.g., shared purpose or collective mindset). In this sense, it provides the conditions necessary for dialogue and learning to occur. Management plays a critical role in enabling *Ba* by providing both visionary direction and assuming responsibility, justification, financial backing, and caring. However, while theoretically rich, the concept of *Ba* remains largely conceptual, creating opportunities for exploration on how it is designed and experienced by employees.

Beyond space, leadership and culture play central roles in enabling cross-boundary collaboration. As Hill (2021) argues, “transforming an organisation starts with transforming its leaders”, underscoring that the organisation’s ability to adapt and collaborate is deeply linked to the mindset and behaviours of its leadership. Leadership is no longer about

command-and-control but about orchestrating collective action and fostering co-creation across functions and levels (ibid). This shift requires *contextual intelligence* – the ability to understand and respond to the most salient dynamics and stakeholders in a given context (Mayo & Nohria, 2005). Furthermore, leaders should demonstrate humility and trust by asking questions, learning from employees at all levels, and acknowledging that they do not have all the answers (Frei & Morriss, 2020).

Ernst and Yip (2009) further emphasise the role of leaders, positing that leaders should bridge the identity-based divides in pursuit of a shared organisational vision, mission, or goal. They describe the workplace as “a crucible for bridging historical and emerging intergroup boundaries” with boundary-spanning leadership serving as a catalyst for both positive organisational change and broader societal impact.

Leaders have also been found to play an important role in creating *psychological safety*, the belief that the work environment is safe for interpersonal risk taking (Edmondson, 1999). Psychological safety creates the conditions for employees to ask questions and speak up, even about their own mistakes, without the fear of being labelled negatively or causing damage to work relationships (Edmondson, 2018). However, despite its clear benefits, psychological safety is often misunderstood; it must be paired with clear goals, high performance standards, and accountability to ensure that learning leads to meaningful impact (ibid).

While existing research emphasises the importance of shared spaces, leadership, and culture in enabling collaboration, it offers limited insight into how these organisational conditions influence the perceived success of structured cross-boundary initiatives. In particular, few studies examine how these enablers interact with specific initiative designs or how they are experienced by employees in different roles or functions.

2.5 The Identified Research Gap

Traditional boundary spanning literature has been criticised for largely focusing on functional, informational, and strategic dimensions, overlooking the emotional, interpersonal, and relational aspects of effective boundary spanning (Cross, Ernst & Pasmore, 2013; Ernst & Yip, 2009). Similarly, while perspective-taking is well established as a psychological process (Ku et al., 2015), much of this research comes from social psychology and has rarely been systematically explored in organisational settings – particularly how perspective-taking unfolds across functional and social identity divides.

Existing studies typically treat boundary spanning and perspective-taking as separate processes, without examining how they might be integrated in practice. This leaves a gap in understanding how organisations can intentionally design and support initiatives that bridge not only structural divides but to truly understand another’s perspective.

Our study addresses this gap by introducing bubble hopping as a contemporary organisational practice that combines these elements. We conceptualise bubble hopping as the practice of stepping outside one’s own departmental “bubble” to engage with others and actively adopt their perspectives. Bubble hopping therefore extends traditional boundary spanning by explicitly incorporating perspective-taking and the associated emotional and relational processes – moving beyond mere information exchange to foster shared understanding and empathy over organisational boundaries.

This conceptualisation of bubble hopping builds on the foundational principles of boundary spanning (the importance of crossing structural divides) but adds a crucial layer: it is not just about meeting across boundaries, but about actively stepping into the other’s perspective.

While bubble hopping is not yet an established theoretical construct, we introduce it as a practical synthesis that addresses these gaps in the literature. By systematically exploring how bubble hopping is designed, experienced, and made successful in organisations, our study contributes a more integrated understanding of how cross-boundary collaboration can be fostered in practice – bridging cognitive, relational, and emotional dimensions of organisational life.

3. Methodology

This section outlines the approach to and motivation behind the research design, explaining the choice of methods for data collection, analysis and quality.

3.1 Research Design and Process

This study used a qualitative research design, relying on semi-structured interviews to explore how bubble hopping is conceptualised, implemented, and evaluated across organisational settings and occupational roles. The approach was considered appropriate given the exploratory nature of the topic and the limited existing theorisation on the phenomenon (Blumer, 1954; Bell et al., 2019, p.361).

A pre-study involving exploratory conversations with three company representatives was conducted to refine the research focus. These conversations indicated that while cross-boundary initiatives are present in many organisations, their design and perceived impact vary considerably. In addition, two consultations with Assistant Professor Emma Stenström were held to support the conceptual framing of bubble hopping and reflect on preliminary interpretations.

The research process was iterative. Data collection and analysis were conducted in parallel, allowing insights from early interviews to inform the ongoing development of interview questions. Sampling continued until thematic saturation was reached. That is, the point at which no new insights emerged and patterns across key categories had been varied and reinforced (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Bell et al., 2019, p. 358).

3.2 Sampling Strategy

This study employed a generic purposive sampling strategy to select participants whose roles and organisational contexts were directly relevant to the research questions (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). Specifically, participants were drawn from Swedish consumer-oriented companies.

To enable both diversity and comparison, we applied a stratified sampling logic across two key dimensions: company type (retail vs. producer) and organisational role (HR,

office-based, frontline, and managerial). Where possible, we included multiple participants from the same organisation to support intra-organisational comparison. This structure enabled us to explore how bubble hopping is designed by leaders and HR and experienced by employees across operational settings.

Snowball sampling was used as a complementary technique, where interviewees were asked to recommend additional participants, often colleagues, enabling further access to relevant participants in cases where initial identification was challenging (Bell et al., 2019, p. 395).

In total, 18 individuals were interviewed, representing ten Swedish companies and covering four occupational roles. While most participants were drawn from retail or producer firms, one interviewee was deliberately included as a deviant case (Bell et al., 2019, p. 394), identified through snowball sampling by another informant. This individual does represent a consumer oriented company; the individual is the founding manager of a company that designs executive learning programs centred on engaging, developmental dialogue with those who have different knowledge or experiences. For over a decade, the company has developed a systematic structure for connecting individuals one-to-one to exchange expertise and broaden perspectives. Including this deviant case provided a comparative lens, illustrating how bubble hopping principles can be purposefully structured and sustained over time, and demonstrating how these practices are operationalised beyond the traditional consumer sector.

The final sample reflected both cross-sectional variation and contextual specificity, aligning with the qualitative aim of exploring nuance over generalisability (Bell et al., 2019, p. 394).

3.3 Interviews

Across 17 interviews, a semi-structure format was considered appropriate given the exploratory nature of the study and the aim to capture participants' interpretations, allowing space for elaboration while ensuring consistency across interviews (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019, p. 436).

An interview guide was used to structure the conversations around three thematic areas aligned with the research questions: *(1) introduction and background, (2) design and*

implementation of bubble hopping initiatives, and (3) perceived outcomes and success factors (see Appendix A: Interview guide). While the guide provided structure, the order of questions varied across interviews to follow the flow of each conversation. Pauses were intentionally used to allow for reflection and follow-up questions helped clarify and deepen responses. This flexible yet purposeful approach aligns with the view of the qualitative interviewer as “gentle”, “steering”, and “critical” simultaneously (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, p.194-195).

To create a shared baseline of understanding and establish the study’s relevance, the interviews began with the concept of bubble hopping being introduced by the interviewers, as some participants were unfamiliar with the term prior to the interview.

Interviews were conducted in Swedish, the professional language of all participants. The subsequent translation to English was treated as an interpretive rather than technical process, aiming to retain participants’ intended meanings over literal equivalence (Xian, 2008; Bell et al., 2022, p. 450). Most interviews were held online via Microsoft Teams, with one conducted in person. The online format allowed for scheduling flexibility and supported accurate transcription via built-in tools. Transcripts were reviewed manually to ensure precision.

Ethical considerations were addressed by providing participants with written information about the study’s purpose, confidentiality measures, and data management procedures. Informed consent was obtained prior to each interview. An overview of participants, including company type and occupational role, is presented in the table below, reflecting the stratified sampling strategy outlined in Section 3.2.

Interviewee	Date	Time	Role category	Type of company	Company identification
1	2025-03-12	27:10	Office worker	Producer	A
2	2025-03-18	42:45	HR	Producer	B
3	2025-03-18	57:32	Frontline employee	Retail	C
4	2025-03-19	47:16	Manager	A company providing executive development by connecting leaders with external experts in critical fields.	D
5	2025-03-20	53:58	Frontline employee	Retail	E
6	2025-03-25	54:13	HR	Retail	C
7	2025-03-26	36:38	Office worker	Retail	C
8	2025-03-26	59:24	Manager	Producer	A
9	2025-03-27	52:08	HR	Producer	F
10	2025-03-27	47:55	Manager	Retail	G
11	2025-03-27	45:22	HR	Retail	H
12	2025-03-28	32:35	HR	Retail	E
13	2025-03-28	43:29	Frontline employee and HR	Retail	I
14	2025-03-31	41:49	Frontline employee	Retail	C
15	2025-04-04	46:26	HR	Producer	J
16	2025-04-09	39:38	Office worker	Retail	H
17	2025-04-10	43:14	Office worker	Producer	F

Table 1: Summary of interviews, including date of conduct, duration, as well as the role and type of company of the interviewees

3.4 Analysis

The analysis followed an inductive logic. Beyond the initial analysis, the two research questions were approached with different methods. In response to the first research question, a typological analysis was employed, while the second research question was explored using the Gioia methodology (Gioia et al., 2012; Bell et al., 2019, p. 519).

Initial analysis involved repeated reading of the interview transcripts, during which reflective memos were written and key observations noted. Data was first grouped under broad topical categories derived from the interview guide, including initiative design, individual experience and organisational context. Selected quotes were retained in Swedish during early coding stages to preserve implicit meaning and participant terminology (Bell et al., 2019, p. 521).

To address Research Question 1, a comparative mapping of described initiatives was conducted, analysing their purpose, format, timing, frequency, follow-up mechanisms and participant configuration. The analysis emphasised conceptual variation over frequency, capturing initiatives mentioned only once if they offered unique insights. This process resulted in a taxonomy of eight initiative types, which is presented in *Table 2: Taxonomy of Bubble Hopping Initiatives*, found in section 4.1.

Analysis related to Research Question 2 focused on identifying perceived success factors and followed the Gioia methodology. First-order codes were developed inductively and grounded in informant language. These were iteratively grouped into second-order themes and then organised into three aggregate dimensions: initiative-related, individual and organisational factors. *Figure 1: Data Structure*, found in section 4.2, presents the resulting data and reflects qualitative rigour (Gioia et al., 2012).

During theme construction, interpretive complexity arose in distinguishing themes because initiative, individual and organisational aspects are interrelated. Following Bell et al. (2019), these distinctions were negotiated through iterative coding, memoing, and author discussions, striving to maintain both conceptual clarity and contextual sensitivity across themes. Further, thematic constructs were treated not as fixed representations, but as evolving frameworks shaped through continued engagement with the data (Bell et al., 2019, p. 523). Theme development continued until no new categories emerged, supporting the assessment that saturation had been reached (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Bell et al., 2019, p. 358).

4. Empirical Findings

This chapter presents the empirical findings from our interviews. Before outlining the results, we restate our definition of bubble hopping in the context of this research: *stepping outside one's own bubble and meeting someone from another – someone whose background, knowledge, practices, or beliefs differ from one's own*. More specifically, it refers to *how individuals from different departments, who do not typically interact in their daily work, are enabled to meet and exchange perspectives*. The findings are structured in two parts: first, we introduce a taxonomy that captures the diverse ways in which bubble hopping is practised; second, we present key themes and less foreseeable notions of the individual, organisational and design-related factors that influence the perceived success of these types of practices. Together, these findings provide a nuanced view of what enables and constrains cross-boundary interaction in the everyday organisational life of consumer-oriented companies.

4.1 Design and Implementation

To explore how organisations design and implement bubble hopping initiatives, we developed a taxonomy of eight initiative types, derived inductively from the interview material. The classification is based on the design characteristics, including purpose, format, timing, frequency, follow-up and people involved. This taxonomy provides a foundation for understanding the different ways bubble hopping is made possible in practice and serves as a basis for the subsequent analysis of how such initiatives are perceived and experienced by employees and leaders.

Initiative	Description	Example from interviews
Ad hoc initiatives	Small-scale, often spontaneous or lightly coordinated bubble hopping that emerges from curiosity, situational needs, or development goals.	A business control manager informally initiates visits to the company's production sites, usually about a few times a year, from the desire to "see with own eyes". During these visits, he walks the production floor, asks questions, and observes how things work. These visits are driven by personal curiosity and a desire to learn. Sometimes, he brings team members or combines visits with departmental meetings to gain new perspectives.
Bubble hop program	Organisation-wide initiatives where employees are paired across units to exchange experiences, often self-directed within a structured frame.	A 12-month "Buddy Program", in which employees from different parts of the organisation, often a store employee and someone from the head office, apply and are matched as "buddies". The term buddy is deliberately used to signal equality and mutual exchange, in contrast to a mentor-mentee relationship. The matching process, an online kick-off and some guidelines are provided by the Learning department, otherwise the program is self-directed according to the needs, interests and schedule of the pairs.
Career progression initiatives	Structured or policy-driven efforts such as trainee programs or internal mobility, encouraging cross-functional experience for career advancement.	One interviewee described his previous employer as a place where internal mobility was embedded in the company's DNA. It was a clear expectation that to advance in one's career and rise through the ranks, it was required to broaden one's competence by gaining experience across different functions.
Cross-function practice for office workers	Office-based employees temporarily work in or shadow frontline roles to understand the core business.	Interviewees from several retailing organisations explained that their office workers are either encouraged or demanded to work a few days every year in the store. This is based on the notion that the store is the heart of the business, and the office is a supporting function to the stores. Thus, unless the office workers understand the core operations, they will not be able to perform in their roles.
Meeting styled forums	Structured, often recurring gatherings across units to share perspectives, align strategies, or collaborate on specific topics.	One interviewee described how their company operates a variety of recurring group-wide forums that bring together employees from different subsidiaries and functions. These forums are topic-specific and designed to address shared challenges such as AI or diversity and inclusion (DEI). Participation varies based on the topic and who can best

		contribute to the discussion. In some cases, frontline perspectives are actively invited when their input is crucial to solving specific challenges. The forums are seen to “gather the full strength of the group” and as an arena for different perspectives.
Mentorship program	Selective, structured initiatives pairing junior employees with senior leaders to support development and leadership readiness.	One interviewee described a leadership mentorship program where junior employees interested in higher leadership roles can apply to shadow a member of the executive team for one year. The program is run annually and includes a formal application and selection process, as the number of available spots is limited. The mentee follows the leader in their daily work and learns by observing and reflecting together.
Reverse hierarchy initiatives	An upward feedback model where employees, including both white- and blue-collar, give structured and informal feedback to their managers.	One employee described a structured feedback process where all staff, including blue-collar employees, are expected to give feedback to their manager. Each year, employees prepare for their own feedback meetings by requesting input from three colleagues, including people from other divisions. This is complemented by a strong feedback culture where informal, continuous feedback is encouraged to promote openness and personal development. The interviewee saw this as a form of bubble hopping across hierarchical levels.
Training programs	Programs focused on skill-building and development, which also serve as platforms for cross-functional learning and collaboration.	One organisation runs an annual talent program for senior employees, where around 12 participants who are nominated by their managers get selected to join a cross-functional learning journey. Each participant leads a workshop based on a real challenge from their department, which the group then collaboratively explores. As a result, it has led to new collaborations, better internal navigation and an employee-driven proposal called “learning days”, which later developed into an organisation-wide bubble hop program.

Table 2: *Taxonomy of Bubble Hopping Initiatives*

This taxonomy reflects that bubble hopping takes many different shapes in organisations. The common denominators across all types were interaction and perspective-taking across boundaries, but the formality, format, directionality, and participants varied.

In terms of formality, initiatives ranged from spontaneous, curiosity-driven efforts such as ad hoc visits to highly structured programs like training programs or career progression initiatives. The format also varied. Some initiatives, such as meeting-style forums and reverse hierarchy feedback models, were dialogue-based. Others involved direct immersion, like cross-functional practice, where office workers quite literally stepped into the shoes of frontline staff, a format primarily observed in retail organisations.

The directionality of interaction differed as well. Some were vertical, such as mentorship or reverse feedback. Others had horizontal, peer-to-peer designs, like the bubble hop programs, which emphasised equality and mutual exchange. As for participants, most initiatives primarily targeted office workers. Some focused specifically on talents or career development candidates, seen in initiatives like training and career progression. Others, like reverse hierarchy and meeting forums, involved broader employee groups across roles and functions, including employees in operations such as production, logistics, and store.

Despite these variations, several themes were consistent: participation was mostly voluntary. Only a few companies made certain initiatives obligatory, such as store practices. Finally, initiatives were all – directly or indirectly – aligned with the company’s broader mission and were introduced with learning as the central goal.

While this taxonomy captures the organisational structures supporting bubble hopping, the perceived success of these initiatives depends on how they are experienced by employees in different roles, as explored in the following section.

4.2 Factors Influencing Perceived Success

In the interviews, the impact of cross-boundary interactions was subjectively understood, with participants offering overlapping perspectives on what constitutes a “successful” bubble hop. While perceptions differed slightly, the results revealed a broad consensus on that a successful bubble hop generates both “soft values”, such as a sense of belonging, pride and organisational cohesion, as well as “hard outcomes”, such as better-informed decision-making, operational efficiency and other contributions to an improved financial result. The following section presents the empirical findings on the factors that shape perceived success in bubble hopping initiatives. These are organised into three dimensions:

initiative design, individual and organisational factors. Each dimension includes both enabling factors and barriers that may hinder the effectiveness of such initiatives.

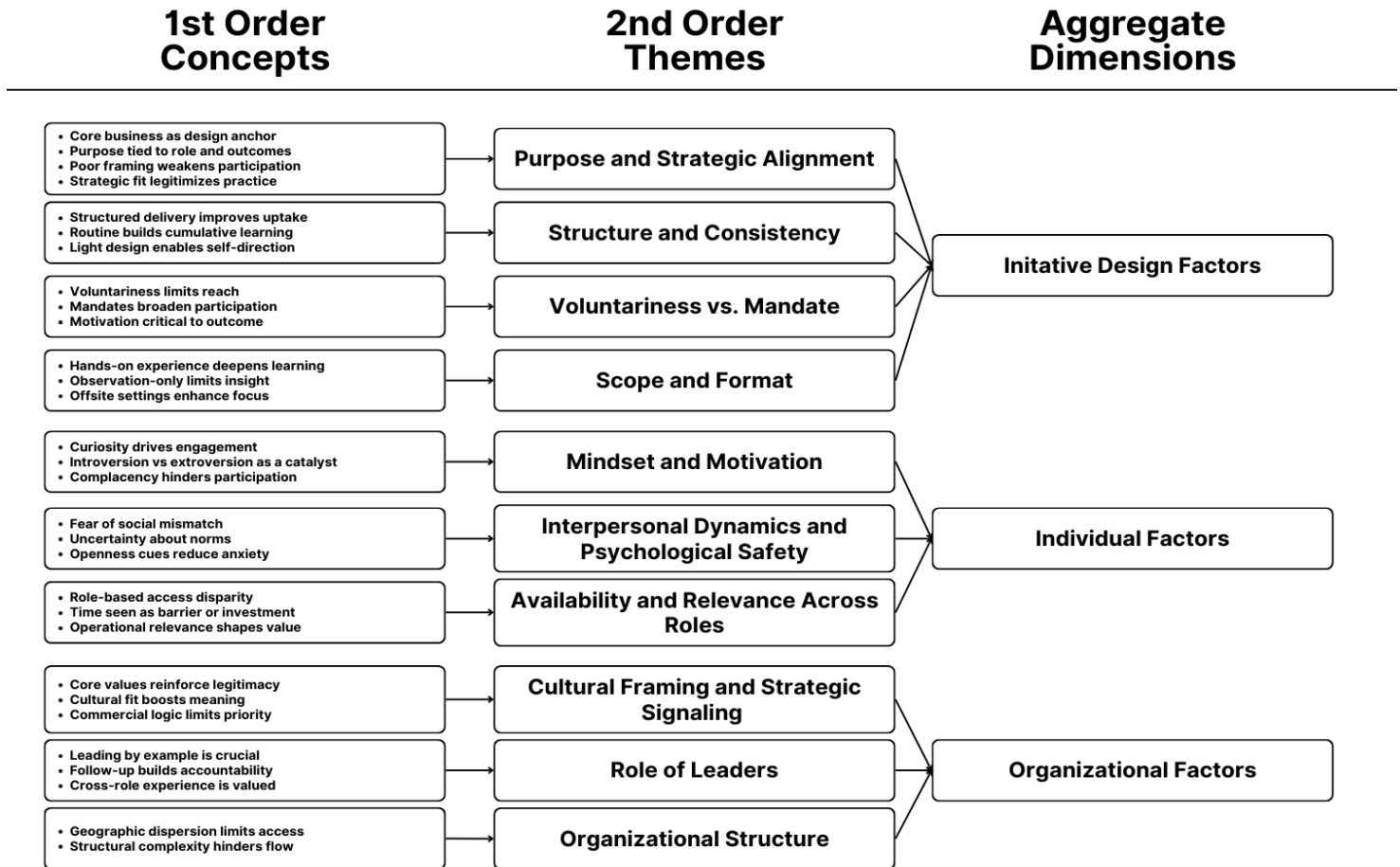


Figure 1: Data structure

4.2.1 Initiative Design Factors

The perceived success of bubble hopping initiatives was closely tied to how they were designed within the organisation. This section presents four key design-related themes that emerged from the data: *Purpose and Strategic Alignment*, *Structure and Consistency*, *Voluntariness vs. Mandate*, and *Scope and Format*.

Purpose and Strategic Alignment

This theme finds that a company's overarching values and goals will shape the design, relevance and legitimacy of bubble hopping initiatives. Consider two examples for illustration: firstly, a retail organisation, for which the store is the core business. Here,

initiatives are designed for office and logistics employees to gain experience in store operations. Secondly, consider a producing organisation in which the entire value chain is managed. In this case, initiatives are designed to enhance understanding of different roles and functions within that value chain. Said examples are further reflected in the quotes below:

“The store is the stage. That’s one of our core values, and no matter where I work in the company, whether in the office or out in the warehouse, our core business is the store. It’s so important to understand the operations – that’s what pays our salaries, that’s what generates results. [...] That’s why we value store experience.” (Interview 11)

“All employees, regardless of their role, have the right to use two [...] workdays per year, which they can freely use to learn about another role or department. [...] We work across the entire value chain, and as a company, every part of that chain has to function – from manufacturing, logistics, and planning to sales and marketing.” (Interview 15)

However, despite initiatives having strategic alignment, several participants noted a challenge in communicating this effectively, resulting in low participation rates. Such insights highlight the importance of pairing the initiatives with a clearly communicated purpose that is linked both to the organisational goals and to the specific role of the employees:

“The challenge is also about understanding why it matters. Why is it important to bring this in? Why is it important to do the practice? Not everyone is convinced just because I talk about it.” (Interview 11)

“I want the things we bring or the initiatives to generate a sense that ‘now I’m getting help to reach my goals’, rather than it becoming one more thing I have to do” (Interview 12)

Finally, initiatives that were embedded in development strategies were perceived as more sustainable and legitimate. One participant described how training programs intentionally included cross-functional exposure, enabling participants to understand the core business and prepare for future roles:

“We focus quite a lot on leadership development in different ways [...] so if you want to become a store manager or franchisee, there are long programs you can take with us. [...] And it’s about needing to understand the core business.” (Interview 6)

Participants also responded positively when bubble hopping enhanced their systems understanding, clarifying how different parts of the organisation are interconnected and how their own role contributes to the bigger picture.

“When I worked in the store during the high season, I really got to feel how the decisions we make centrally affect their everyday life. It was an eye-opener.” (Interview 10)

Under the theme of initiative design factors, purpose and strategic alignment emerged as key to perceived legitimacy and engagement. While most initiatives were designed to reflect the organisation’s core business logic, their impact depended on how clearly this purpose was communicated and how well it connected to employees’ roles.

Structure and Consistency

Several participants call for a structure, guidance and some person or department that is responsible for it to occur and to be followed up. They believe that bubble hopping will not happen on its own:

“You need someone to organise it, because I think it has to be structured in a specific way. Otherwise, it won’t happen.” (Interview 4)

Structure is not only needed for it to occur, but also for it to occur consistently. As one participant notes, a single interaction may not yield value, but as interactions are aggregated over time, they do:

“It’s kind of like when you work out. You might have a bad training session, but it’s the routine that keeps you in shape over time. That’s how I think about visiting the operations and being out there. Each individual visit might not always feel worthwhile, but taken together, it really is.” (Interview 7)

However, one perspective argues that while structure is important as a foundation, bubble hopping, in its simplest form, requires relatively few resources because the individual curiosity functions as a driving force:

“This is a learning activity that, in its simplicity, requires very few resources [...] We feel that we get a great deal of value for the money and time invested. In its simplicity, it’s quite brilliant to bring together people who are curious about one another, because that curiosity makes them somewhat self-directed in their learning.” (Interview 6)

These reflections suggest that while structural support and coordination are important to enable and sustain bubble hopping, its success relies on creating just enough framework to activate and amplify the intrinsic motivation that drives meaningful cross-boundary learning. This connects to the following theme: *Voluntariness vs. Mandate*.

Voluntariness vs. Mandate

Voluntariness was a recurring theme in initiative design, particularly in relation to individual *Mindset and Motivation* (see 4.2.2). While most initiatives were optional, some organisations required participation in specific cross-boundary activities, for instance, during onboarding or through an annual in-store day for office staff. Where participation was voluntary, the purpose was often emphasised to communicate value and encourage engagement. One interviewee reflected on the balance between voluntariness and mandate:

“It will not work to force people into it, it’s more about [communicating]: Why is this good? Why is it important to us? [...] But to some extent, it’s actually beneficial if it’s mandatory, because then it comes from leadership, from your manager, that you’re expected to participate. Otherwise, when it’s voluntary, it tends to fall through the cracks” (Interview 2)

Some participants took a stronger stance, arguing that participation should be required. This view is rooted in the belief that a narrow mindset, marked by reluctance to explore other perspectives, was seen to distort understanding of the organisation and its context, ultimately weakening business outcomes. One interviewee argued that gaining other perspectives, particularly that of the customer, should be a mandatory part of organisational learning to strengthen competitiveness:

“I think what we need to do as an organisation, which we’ve again never really done, is to actually force people to move between bubbles. Our [...] coworkers must get out and see the reality...” (Interview 8)

Paradoxically, several noted that those least motivated to participate in bubble hopping might be the ones who would benefit from it the most.

“It’s often the same people who do it, the ones who are already curious. It’s not always the ones who need it the most.” (Interview 6)

These reflections highlight a trade-off: while personal curiosity and motivation are essential for bubble hopping to be meaningful and effective, relying solely on voluntary participation risks excluding those who may benefit the most. If participation is not clearly expected, or even required, it may never happen at all, especially among those with narrower mindsets.

Scope and Format

Participants consistently emphasised that the perceived value of bubble hopping depended on the nature and depth of the experience. Programs involving direct, hands-on exposure, such as short-term role immersion or internal transfers, were seen as particularly impactful, as they required individuals to actively engage in the daily reality of another role, sometimes even assuming its responsibilities. This level of involvement enabled deeper learning and a more nuanced understanding of the work. One participant reflected:

“It wasn’t until I stood there trying to solve the problem myself that I realised how pressured it is. It gives a different understanding than just talking about it.” (Interview 10)

In comparison, observation-based or discussion formats were associated with limited idea generation and more passive learning. Participants noted that certain insights, especially those rooted in tacit knowledge, could not be fully captured through conversation alone:

“It turns into a lot of talk and little action when it’s just meetings. You need to actually experience it.” (Interview 13)

Building on the value of immersive experiences, participants also emphasised the importance of timing, suggesting that engaging in bubble hopping during peak operational periods can enhance learning. Experiencing a function under pressure was seen as a shortcut to deeper insight:

“[Employees] are out working in the stores very frequently, basically during payday weekends, the Christmas shopping season, and other peak periods like holidays. You gain 2 weeks’ worth of experience in 2 days if you work during the holidays” (Interview 10)

Even when the format was discussion-based, participants noted that the setting played a role in shaping the effectiveness of cross-boundary learning. Participants explained the advantages of not being in the usual work environment, such as generating new ideas or being present in the discussions:

“So you go away somewhere, like a conference center or similar; somewhere outside the usual work environment [...] Otherwise people run off to check their laptops or say, “I just need to take this meeting, I’ll be gone for fifteen minutes.” [...] The laptop has to stay in the room. You have to put your phone in a box” (Interview 9)

These reflections highlight that both the scope and the format of bubble hopping matter. Impact was greatest when participants were fully immersed in the work of another role and when the experience took place outside their usual environment.

4.2.2 Individual Factors

Perceived success in bubble hopping was strongly influenced by individual mindset, emotional comfort and role relevance. Openness, curiosity, and psychological safety enabled engagement, while time constraints and unclear relevance hindered participation. The following section outlines three key themes: *Mindset and Motivation*, *Interpersonal Dynamics and Psychological Safety* and *Availability and Relevance Across Roles*.

Mindset and Motivation

A consistent finding was the importance of an open and curious mindset and prosocial motivation. Employees who held a desire to learn and connect were more likely to describe meaningful takeaways of cross-boundary interactions. One participant reflects this:

“When I do the bubble hop [...] it creates business value because I gain knowledge I can share in other contexts, but it also brings a lot of personal value. It helps me understand what I’m doing, my company, our core business [...] I think there’s a lot to gain from each other, just as people, no matter where I am in an organisation – that core value is important to me.” (Interview 5)

However, not all participants were equally inclined. The same interviewee as quoted above also acknowledged that some consider meeting new people as far beyond their comfort zone:

“Absolutely not everyone is open to it. I’ve met many nice colleagues [...] who would firmly say no [...]. People feel most comfortable in what’s familiar. [...] Maybe not so extroverted but rather introverted, and if you don’t thrive in those kinds of settings, you might just read about it on the intranet” (Interview 5)

Others offered a different interpretation, attributing the lack of engagement less to personality and more to a form of complacency:

“The reason it’s not done to a greater extent is probably just plain laziness, to be honest. It takes time, it’s a bit of a hassle. Many people here are probably quite comfortable and think ‘Well, I take responsibility for my part, and that should be enough’.” (Interview 17)

Interpersonal Dynamics and Psychological Safety

Closely linked to the mindset was the perceived emotional risk of stepping outside one’s domain. Several interviews described feeling exposed, vulnerable and uncertain. These feelings emerged both from being limited intellectually and from social anxiety.

“The human stuff, you know? What if my co-worker gets disappointed, because [he/she] got me and maybe wanted someone else instead? [...] Will we click? Will we have something to talk about? Will [he/she] find it interesting?” (Interview 6)

However, some participants suggested that feelings of insecurity could be mitigated if expectations were made clear, questions were encouraged, and individual opinions were invited. Thus, if psychological safety was felt:

“I didn’t know how much I could ask either, because I didn’t know if they would think I was unknowledgeable. [Co-worker] then said right away that it was okay not to understand everything. That made it much easier to take part.” (Interview 15)

These reflections suggest that emotional risk is an inherent part of bubble hopping, but thoughtful framing and reassurance can significantly lower the threshold for participation.

Availability and Relevance Across Roles

Findings reveal that bubble hopping is not a one-size-fits-all practice. Rather, its perceived success varies significantly depending on who is engaging in the practice and with whom. Differences in time availability, operational pressure, and the perceived relevance of cross-boundary interaction to task performance vary across roles and shape how bubble hopping is valued.

“[Bubble hopping] is [...] very much depending on what role you have and which organisation or department you work for. [...] Each role is a specialist function, and that function or that person is employed for their part and so on” (Interview 2)

Bubble hopping was particularly challenging for frontline workers because their roles require constant on-site presence and operational focus, leaving little time and flexibility to step away from their immediate responsibilities. Office-based employees, in contrast, were perceived to have both greater flexibility and benefit from bubble hopping, especially when the hop was made to the core operations – the “reality” – such as the stores for a retailing company.

“At our office, you can block out an hour for this kind of thing. It's harder out in operations.”
(Interview 6)

“The main purpose, really, is to create an understanding for those who don't work in the store and who risk becoming quite disconnected from reality” (Interview 16)

Irrespective of differences in flexibility, it was found that bubble hopping risks not being a large enough priority to justify the opportunity cost of pursuing one's core role responsibilities and other duties. Several respondents reveal time as a scarce resource, hesitantly being spent:

“It's as simple as everyone having so much to do. Everyone is so busy with their own stuff and wants to focus on their tasks, and then you just want to go home to your family at the end of the day.”
(Interview 1)

“It's not something you prioritise; it's more like a 'good to have', so it ends up being seen as a benefit. It lands pretty far down the to-do list when there's a lot else going on. Like when you're under pressure with deadlines and so on, and it's actually part of your role-specific deliverables.”
(Interview 15)

On the contrary, for some, bubble hopping was perceived as a means for learning, improving performance in one's role and a clear benefit to saving time in day-to-day operations:

“It's very unnecessary to reinvent the wheel. I usually tell people who don't believe in [bubble hopping] [...], there's always someone who knows it better and someone who has already done it. So why don't we ask how they did it?” (Interview 4)

These nuances illustrate that the effectiveness of bubble hopping depends on perceived availability and relevance, with a contrast between office and frontline workers. Time is a particularly emphasised theme, where some denote it as a cost and others as an investment.

4.2.3 Organisational Factors

Participants highlighted a range of organisational factors that either enabled or constrained perceived success. Whether initiatives were seen as legitimate and sustainable often depended on how easily they could be carried out across geographically or functionally dispersed settings, how leaders championed them and how well they aligned with core organisational values. The following sections outline the themes: *Organisational Structure*, *Role of Leaders* and *Organisational Culture*.

Organisational Structure

A straightforward yet significant barrier to bubble hopping is the physical and organisational separation between sites. Many organisations operate across multiple locations – offices, production facilities, and stores – which limits opportunities for spontaneous interaction. As one participant noted:

“Organisationally, I see that we face challenges because we’re so different [having] different divisions across various sectors and industries, but also the geographical challenge.” (Interview 9)

Beyond geographical distance, organisations may find it more difficult to implement bubble hopping in certain frontline operations. One participant explains:

“We mostly do study visits at the warehouse just to observe. Not just anyone can go in and start working in a warehouse. I think the threshold is higher for doing that in a simple way.” (Interview 16)

These reflections highlight how structural conditions, ranging from geographic dispersion to operational constraints, can limit bubble hopping.

Role of Leaders

In many cases, HR teams provided structural support for bubble hopping but were reliant on managers to activate it in practice. Leaders ensured consistency by taking part in the initiatives themselves, setting expectations on team members, and following up.

Firstly, participants emphasised the importance of the tone at the top, where managers lead by example by actively engaging in bubble hopping themselves. This visible participation gives credibility to the initiatives and signals that they are a valued part of organisational culture:

“One way is to really highlight it through the managers – having the managers actually do it themselves [...] which gives it a different kind of credibility when you talk about it.” (Interview 15)

Leaders were also seen as essential for maintaining accountability. Participants described how managers are expected to not only encourage participation but also follow up on outcomes.

“Managers play an important role in this. To actively push employees to do the in-store practice, to encourage them to actually go out into the stores. But it is also important to follow up: How did it go? What did you bring back to the organisation? How can this affect your work?”(Interview 11)

In some organisations, internal mobility was formalised as a prerequisite for certain leadership roles, emphasising the value placed on cross-boundary experience. In other organisations, having experience from different roles was part of the organisational culture and seen as essential to step into a leading role:

“It was part of the DNA – if you wanted to move up and forward in your career, you had to broaden your competence.” (Interview 11)

Organisational Culture

This theme closely relates to Purpose and Strategic Alignment in section 4.2.1. Several participants emphasised that organisational culture, often expressed through carefully worded core values, played a key role in shaping the perceived legitimacy of initiatives.

When cross-boundary interaction was encouraged through values such as *togetherness*, *openness*, or *continuous learning*, it gained symbolic power and contributed to higher participation. As participants explained:

“One of our core values is openness, which means being transparent with one another, seeking synergies, gaining others’ perspectives, and collaborating across organisational boundaries.” (Interview 9)

“This is also something we strongly believe in, based on how we want to be as a company. We believe in relationships and that we become stronger through these kinds of small micro-relations throughout the whole system.” (Interview 6)

The opposite also holds true: if the organisational values and tradition, often perceived to be shaped by the ownership structure, do not give cross-boundary legitimacy, such behaviour will likely not take place. For example, in organisations where financial returns for investors are the highest priority, initiatives that do not evidently improve financial statements, such as bubble hopping, will not be encouraged. As one participant describes:

“We’re very sales-focused. Everything we do should lead to increased sales. [...] If you look at my previous organisation, it was the opposite. There, it was individual-based, and the focus was often on personal growth. [...] Again, I think it depends on the organisation and what is considered important.” (Interview 2)

A third dimension of culture extends beyond the boundaries of the organisation. Some companies view it as part of their responsibility to contribute positively to society by actively promoting inclusion and embracing diverse perspectives. As one participant reflected:

“This idea of bubble hopping is also incredibly important now, as we’re living in a time of polarisation [...] There are strong forces in our societies that seek to create conflict between people, portraying difference as a problem. In contrast, we [organisation] want to say that difference is an asset that makes us stronger, if we can manage and understand it together. In that sense, working with these kinds of issues is also important from a broader societal perspective.” (Interview 6)

These reflections illustrate that organisational culture – shaped by ownership structures, values and leadership – plays a foundational role in whether cross-boundary initiatives are implemented, legitimised and encouraged.

In conclusion, the findings show that bubble hopping, while operationally embedded in organisations, is ultimately a human practice. It hinges on purposeful design, individual mindset, leadership, and culture. Across initiatives, employees perceived success not merely in terms of organisational outcomes, but in how it made them feel about themselves, their coworkers and the organisation they work for. The following discussion explores how these findings relate to existing theory and what they imply for future research and practice.

5. Discussion

In this section, we return to our exploratory research questions to interpret the findings in light of existing theory. By connecting our empirical insights to organisational literature, particularly on boundary spanning, and social psychological perspectives such as perspective-taking, we highlight where the results extend and contradict current understandings. The section concludes with what these insights imply for organisations in practice.

5.1 How Do Organisations Design and Implement Bubble Hopping Initiatives Across Organisational Units?

Our empirical findings - reflected in a taxonomy - show that bubble hopping manifests in diverse organisational forms including ad hoc initiatives, bubble hop programs, career progression initiatives, cross-functional practice for office workers, meeting style forums, reverse hierarchy and training. These vary in formality, directionality, format and participants, reflecting that bubble hopping is not a standardised practice rather a flexible organisational logic. The design of initiatives both extends and challenges theoretical principles.

Firstly, in line with intergroup contact theory (Pettigrew et al., 2011), many initiatives were designed based on voluntary participation and shared goals such as mutual understanding, both of which are identified as beneficial conditions in intergroup contact. Interviewees framed bubble hopping as curiosity-driven and intrinsically motivated, aligning with the view of perspective-taking as both a cognitive ability and a motivational stance (Ku et al., 2015). Consequently, voluntariness was particularly emphasised, with most initiatives encouraging rather than mandating participation.

However, another condition central to intergroup contact theory - the principle of equal status - was inconsistently applied. Equal status was explicitly emphasised in bubble hop programs, where a specific initiative was called a “Buddy Program”, rather than a mentorship program, to signal equality of the participants. In this program, both participants were “buddies”, rather than one being a superior mentor and the other an inferior mentee. Similarly, some meeting-style forums were designed as arenas for diverse perspectives, intentionally inviting voices from different units and emphasising equal contribution.

Further, the findings support Wirtz and Jerger's (2016) argument that customer-facing employees benefit from interdepartmental support to deliver customer satisfaction. In line with this, most retail organisations in our study required or encouraged office employees to engage in frontline store practice. This reflects the store's central role in the retail business model, where revenue is directly tied to customer encounters. In contrast, such cross-functional exposure was rarely mentioned in producing organisations, neither in operations like production nor in customer-facing roles.

This surprising finding can be connected to De Waal et al. (2019), who found that values are one of the strongest predictors of collaboration success. In many retail organisations, the store is explicitly framed as the heart of the business and embedded in the company's value system. In contrast, producing organisations may lack a similarly unifying focal point, reducing the perceived relevance and legitimacy of such initiatives. This asymmetry warrants future research exploring how the extent and nature of boundary spanning vary across industries.

Finally, our findings raise important questions about who should carry out boundary-spanning work. Some initiatives, such as training and mentorship programs, were designed specifically for leaders or aspiring leaders. Others, such as bubble hop programs and reverse feedback, were more inclusive, targeting employees across levels. Additionally, ad hoc initiatives were found to take place across hierarchical levels but relied on encouraging cultures and managers. This variation reflects a broader tension in the literature regarding the most effective agents of boundary spanning. For instance, Leicht-Deobald et al. (2025) hypothesised that team members would be best positioned to span boundaries. Yet, their meta-analysis found that leaders were, in fact, more effective overall. Our findings do not resolve this tension, but instead suggest that in practice, boundary spanning is variably distributed across roles and shaped by organisational context. Avenues for future research are to further address this tension, exploring whether boundary span is equally effective for employees without formal authority and leaders, and if so, under what conditions.

In conclusion, the taxonomy shows that bubble hopping is a multifaceted phenomenon. Organisations interpret and implement it in different ways depending on strategic priorities, operational realities and organisational culture. While this section has outlined how initiatives are designed, the next section will explore the factors shaping their perceived success.

5.2 What Factors Influence the Perceived Success of These Efforts According to Leaders and Employees?

5.2.1 Strategic, Cultural, and Role-Based Legitimacy

A consistent theme was that the perceived success hinges on whether the bubble hopping initiative is clearly aligned with the company's business logic (e.g., revenue drivers), its cultural DNA (e.g., ownership structure and values) and the employee's specific role (e.g., "how does this make me perform better in my role?"). If that alignment was lacking or poorly communicated, interactions were seen as less meaningful, and participation remained low.

Similar to earlier findings, these also connect to the study of De Waal et al. (2019), finding that values and reward mechanisms are the strongest predictors of collaboration success. Many companies in our study framed bubble hopping through their stated values, such as openness, curiosity, or relationship-building, which granted the initiatives symbolic legitimacy. However, concrete reward mechanisms were less emphasised. While a few participants mentioned follow-ups, such as discussing takeaways in the next team meeting or having reflective debriefs, most perceived systematic knowledge sharing as a missed opportunity. In this sense, organisations partly operationalised the "values" component of De Waal et al.'s framework but often fell short on reinforcing behaviours through reward mechanisms, such as rewarding people who actually show collaborative behaviour.

This strategic and cultural framing also connects to Nonaka's (1998) concept of Ba, a shared space for knowledge creation. Cultivating such a space requires not only financial support, but also vision, responsibility and care from management. Several interviewees emphasised that when leaders clearly articulated why bubble hopping mattered and how it aligned with the organisation's long-term mission, employees were more inclined to engage. This underscores the critical role of management in shaping and sustaining an environment conducive to learning.

However, our findings also suggest that Ba is not solely created from the top down. Rather, it is co-created by employees. When employees understand how their work contributes to the larger picture, they are more likely to take other perspectives (Parker & Axtell, 2001; Ku et al., 2015). In this study, employees who held an integrated understanding made them value

and participate in various bubble hopping initiatives. At the same time, the experience of bubble hopping itself is found to enhance integrated understanding, highlighting a recursive dynamic. Bubble hopping both *requires* and *cultivates* systems thinking. This study thus suggests a two-way relationship between integrated understanding and perspective-taking, extending existing literature (Parker & Axtell, 2011; Batson et al., 1996).

Further, many interviewees emphasised that effective communication of the initiative's purpose was a decisive factor. In particular, leaders and HR teams played an active role in translating the strategic relevance of bubble hopping to different audiences. This required tailoring the message across departments (e.g., certain do not have access to desktops, requiring other communication methods) and leveraging both formal channels (e.g., onboarding) and informal ones (e.g., word-of-mouth, role modelling). Without such efforts, even well-designed initiatives risked not reaching intended participation levels.

This need for clear communication and framing resonates with Ernst and Yip's (2009) boundary-spanning tactics of "reframing" and "nesting". Our findings suggest that bubble hopping is most effective when organisations succeed in both helping employees see themselves as part of a greater whole (reframing), while also validating their specialised contributions (nesting).

Moreover, Ernst and Yip (2009) argue that organisations increasingly serve as arenas for bridging social identity divides, with boundary-spanning leadership acting as a catalyst for inclusion and broader societal change. This was reflected in our data, where some participants linked bubble hopping to concerns such as polarisation and a commitment to embracing difference. In these cases, purposeful alignment extended beyond strategy and role relevance; it was also about reinforcing the organisation's values and perceived role in society.

In sum, perceived success begins with perceived purpose. Bubble hopping must feel relevant to the business, legitimate within the culture, and worthwhile to the employee. Organisations where relationship-building and learning are embedded in the company's DNA are more likely to implement these initiatives successfully. However, even in such companies, success depends on clearly signalling the purpose of initiatives, ensuring that it resonates across diverse roles and mindsets.

5.2.2 Mindset, Leadership, and the Readiness Paradox

A strong and recurring theme in the interviews was the pivotal role of the individual in determining the success of bubble hopping initiatives. Regardless of organisation or initiative, the employees' prosocial motivation, open mindset, and specifically curiosity for knowledge were consistently described as the most immediate enablers of participation. While Ku et al. (2015) highlight that perspective-taking depends on both cognitive capacity and motivation, their comprehensive literature review does not explicitly recognise curiosity as a distinct factor. Our findings suggest that curiosity should be more explicitly incorporated into theoretical models of perspective-taking, as it appears to play an important role in fostering cross-boundary engagement in organisational settings.

Motivation and willingness were also shaped by how employees perceived the interpersonal risks involved in bubble hopping, such as entering unfamiliar settings, revealing knowledge gaps, or engaging in vulnerable dialogue. These patterns align with Cross et al. (2013), who argue that the most salient organisational boundaries today are emotional, psychological, and identity-based. Our findings support this view and further highlight the role of psychological safety (Edmondson, 2018) as a necessary condition for cross-boundary participation. Interviewees noted that they only felt comfortable participating when they were explicitly invited to contribute, or when others signalled that it was acceptable not to understand everything. Initiatives like reverse hierarchy, such as upward feedback to managers, and certain meeting-style forums were especially effective in creating this sense of safety, as they explicitly framed non-traditional voices as valuable.

These insights point to the role of leaders. Research consistently links psychological safety to leadership behaviour. Scholars such as Edmondson (2018), Hill (2021), and Frei & Morriss (2020) argue that leaders who show humility, acknowledge their own learning gaps, and invite input foster climates of trust and collaboration. Our findings confirm this: employees were more willing to engage in bubble hopping when managers participated themselves and followed up on the experience, reinforcing both legitimacy and learning.

However, not all participants placed responsibility primarily on leadership. Some offered a more critical perspective, describing certain employees as lacking curiosity, being narrow-minded or unwilling to stretch beyond their job descriptions. This behaviour reflects a

low degree of flexible role orientation, where individuals adhere strictly to assigned tasks without engaging beyond their formal responsibilities (Parker & Axtell, 2001). Paradoxically, these employees were often seen as those who might benefit the most from bubble hopping, raising an important question: should organisations design these initiatives around the willing few, or mandate participation to reach those less inclined but potentially most in need?

Beyond willingness, interviews also highlighted the importance of structural conditions in shaping employee engagement. Accountability and job autonomy are important predictors of cross-boundary behaviour (Parker & Axtell, 2001) and learning (Edmondson, 2018). Employees who feel responsible for outcomes beyond their immediate tasks and have the autonomy to act are more likely to adopt a broader organisational perspective and engage in bubble hopping initiatives. While these conditions often accompany leadership roles, several non-leaders also described feeling similarly empowered. This suggests that accountability and autonomy are not exclusive to formal authority. In line with existing research, our findings reinforce that psychological safety alone is insufficient; it must be paired with autonomy and accountability mechanisms to effectively encourage cross-boundary engagement.

In sum, this study offers a more nuanced and critical view of how individual readiness interacts with organisational conditions. It extends existing literature by emphasising curiosity as a distinct enabler of perspective-taking, challenging the over-reliance on leadership as the sole driver of engagement, and identifying a paradoxical target group. These findings suggest that fostering successful cross-boundary interaction is not only about designing initiatives, but also about creating an organisational foundation that enables all employees to step outside their bubbles.

5.2.3 Structural Support and Format

The final set of factors shaping the perceived success of bubble hopping relates to how initiatives are structured. A recurring theme across interviews was that bubble hopping does not happen on its own; rather, it requires someone responsible, often within HR or learning and development, to coordinate and ensure continuity. This aligns with Liu and Meyer (2020), who argue that HRM plays a critical role in materialising boundary-spanning behaviour, stressing that knowledge transfers “cannot occur in a vacuum” but depend on practices such as collaboration, training, workshops, and opportunities for social interaction.

Several participants also emphasised the importance of consistency; while a single bubble hop may have limited value, the impact grows when cross-boundary interactions are embedded at scale over time. This reflects Liu and Meyer's view that when such initiatives become routine, their effects compound.

However, materialising boundary spanning is difficult, particularly when boundaries are geographical. Our findings suggest that in fragmented organisations, with dispersed business units, more deliberate planning and resources are required to implement bubble hopping. These efforts imply costs that must be weighed against the long-term value of improved knowledge flow and collaboration. This confirms that organisational boundaries are multifaceted (Cross, Ernst & Pasmore, 2013) and suggests that different types of boundaries, whether geographic, functional or psychological, require different management approaches.

The most persistently mentioned barrier was time. Consistent with Ku et al. (2015) and Škerlavaj et al. (2018), our findings show that high cognitive load and task pressure limit employees' capacity for perspective-taking, leading them to focus narrowly on their own tasks and disengage from cross-functional concerns. Bubble hopping was unlikely to succeed when positioned as an "add-on" to already demanding roles. Instead, it needs to be integrated into how work is structured. Participation must be perceived as justified through alignment with both individual roles and strategic goals, as emphasised in Section 5.2.1.

A closer look at time as a barrier reveals a deeper tension. While participants often cited a lack of time, this was rarely just a logistical issue. Instead, it reflected perceived value: time was consistently made for activities seen as meaningful. In this way, time served as a proxy for commitment. When bubble hopping was not experienced as worthwhile, it quickly got deprioritised. This reinforces the importance of emotional framing and perceived relevance, not just for enabling participation, but also for ensuring it is prioritised when demands compete.

Another structural aspect is the format of initiatives. Several participants described immersive formats, including job shadowing or working directly alongside colleagues in other departments, as particularly impactful. These experiences fostered humility, empathy and as one interviewee described, "a completely different understanding" (Interview 13). This supports the concept of socialisation, where tacit knowledge is shared through experience

(Nonaka, 1994). Some forms of knowledge, such as how a customer thinks, how a store operates or what happens when a production line is disrupted, can simply not be codified.

Simultaneously, participants raised the benefits of being in neither of the participants' ordinary workplaces but instead in a neutral place, where employees could be more present. This aligns with suspending - the tactic of boundary suspending that seeks to create a neutral zone for social interactions (Ernst & Yip, 2009). Thus, both immersive formats and neutral locations are promising facilitators to realise perceived success.

In sum, our findings confirm the importance of HRM as an enabler of boundary spanning and cross-boundary interactions as a routine (Liu and Meyer, 2020). Importantly, however, they challenge the assumption that HRM support alone is sufficient: even when enabling structures are present, bubble hopping is unlikely to succeed unless participation is perceived as integrated into how work is organised. Our findings also reflect existing research that boundaries are characterised differently (Cross et al., 2013), while adding that different barriers require different approaches. Finally, by highlighting the unique power of immersive formats, the findings reinforce Nonaka's (1994) concept of socialisation as critical to the transfer of tacit knowledge.

5.3 Managerial Implications

Building on both the theoretical perspectives and empirical findings presented in this thesis, this section addresses the why, what, who, when, and how of designing and implementing effective bubble hopping initiatives.

Why is it necessary?

Bubble hopping fosters cross-functional understanding, perspective-taking and collaboration, capabilities increasingly critical in today's complex, fast-paced, and often polarised work environments. When embedded into company culture, it supports both performance and inclusion, and in some cases, reinforces the organisation's societal role as a connector across divides.

What initiatives are most effective?

All initiatives identified in the taxonomy are found to enhance perspective-taking across

organisational units and are encouraged to be employed. Regardless of initiative type, all participants benefit from a follow-up where the insights gained are shared and reflected upon. While dialogue-based initiatives are valuable, immersive formats, such as job shadowing, cross-functional practice, or internal transfers, were consistently viewed as the most impactful. These allow employees to experience others' perspectives directly, promoting empathy, idea generation and tacit knowledge transfer. For dialogue-based initiatives, a neutral off-site environment is encouraged. Moreover, initiatives should be rooted in strategically central operations, such as the store for a retail company. In other sectors, equivalent focal points should be identified.

Who should be involved?

Participation should not be assumed to suit everyone. The findings suggest that mindset, motivation, and curiosity are key enablers, without which bubble hopping may be ineffective. However, interviewees reflected on a possible paradox: those with a more closed mindset, less inclined to engage with unfamiliar perspectives, may actually stand to gain the most. This raises the strategic consideration of whether to rely on voluntary participation or to carefully broaden inclusion by supporting those who might not self-select into such initiatives.

When should it happen?

A single bubble hop may not yield value, but when interactions are repeated and aggregated across the organisation, they do. Making bubble hopping a routine, rather than an isolated event, is therefore recommended to realise impact. In relation to immersive formats, bubble hopping during high-intensity periods, such as Christmas for retail organisations, when activity is more intense, can provide more exposure in a shorter period of time.

How to make it work?

Clarify the purpose and make sure it is aligned with business logic, cultural values, and individual role performance. Dedicate someone, typically within HR or L&D, to coordinate and sustain momentum. Make time justified, not by making bubble hopping an extra task, but by integrating it into existing workflows. When employees understand how it supports their performance and development, as well as how their role fits into the bigger picture, they are more likely to engage. Lastly, when managers lead by example, they set the tone for cross-boundary interactions, in turn solidifying bubble hopping in organisations.

6. Conclusion

6.1 Summary

As organisations seek to bridge internal divides and foster collaboration, structured initiatives like bubble hopping offer a promising yet complex approach. This study explored how such initiatives are designed and experienced in consumer-oriented firms, identifying eight distinct formats shaped by strategic priorities, roles, and cultural framing. Perceived success was influenced by factors at the initiative, individual, and organisational levels, with tensions emerging around voluntariness, time investment, and scalability. These findings reveal that effective cross-boundary collaboration requires not just intent but careful navigation of autonomy, structure, and support.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the fields of boundary spanning and perspective-taking by showing how these processes intersect in practice. It highlights a two-way relationship between integrated understanding and perspective-taking and identifies curiosity as a distinct antecedent to cross-boundary engagement. By showing how individual readiness is shaped by strategic framing, leadership, and structural accessibility, the study also advances a more integrated view of individual and organisational enablers to cross-boundary engagement.

Ultimately, when organisations support employees in stepping beyond their immediate roles and contexts – their bubbles – they facilitate not only knowledge sharing and improved performance, but also a sense of pride, empathy and engagement. In some cases, these initiatives transcended strategic objectives, signalling a broader organisational commitment to bridging societal divides.

6.2 Limitations and Future Research

This study was conducted within the specific national and sectoral context of Swedish consumer-oriented companies and relied on self-reported narratives. As such, the findings reflect perceptions rather than observed behaviours and should be interpreted accordingly. Further, participants were primarily individuals who expressed interest in the topic, which may have introduced a positive bias towards bubble hopping and related concepts. This

self-selection might have limited the diversity of perspectives, potentially overlooking more critical or sceptical viewpoints.

Another limitation is that snowball sampling was used to some extent, which could have led to a more homogeneous set of informants with similar experiences or attitudes. Future research should aim to include participants who are less engaged with or more critical of cross-boundary practices, to ensure a broader and more balanced understanding of how such initiatives are perceived in different organisational contexts. Additionally, if respondents gave answers they believed were expected or desired, social desirability bias may be a limitation (Bell, Bryman, and Harley, 2019, p. 227).

The concept of bubble hopping, while conceptually useful, remains variably understood and applied in practice. Introducing the term during interviews may have shaped participants' interpretations in ways not fully visible in the data. Future research could explore how organisations adopt, adapt, or resist the concept of bubble hopping, and how different meanings and practices emerge across settings. The taxonomy developed in this study offers a foundation for such research.

Beyond conceptual clarification, future research can address methodological and contextual limitations of this study. To build on this study's contribution to understanding the intersection of boundary spanning and perspective-taking in practice, observational or ethnographic methods could be used to examine how such interactions unfold in real time and influence organisational outcomes. Finally, this study surfaces the unresolved question of who is best positioned to span boundaries: employees or leaders. Future research may investigate the effectiveness of different agents and the organisational conditions under which each approach is most impactful.

In conclusion, these directions highlight the need for continued exploration of cross-boundary interactions, particularly at the intersection of boundary spanning and perspective-taking – an area to which this study offers an early contribution.

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8. Appendix

Appendix A: Interview Guide

Introduction

1. Please introduce yourself and your role in the company

Before we move on, we want to clarify that this interview is about structured “bubble hopping” at the workplace. To do a bubble hop means to step outside your own bubble and meet someone from another, someone whose background, knowledge, opinions, or beliefs differ from your own. We aim to investigate how companies organize bubble hopping in the workplace. In other words, how they enable people from different departments, who do not usually interact in their daily work, to meet and exchange perspectives.

2. What does the concept of “bubble hopping” mean to you and your organisation?
3. What initiatives does your organisation have that structurally and systematically encourage bubble hopping?
4. Can you describe your role in these bubble hopping initiatives?

Design

5. Please describe your organisation’s initiatives to enable cross-functional meetings.
6. (Purpose) What is the main purpose of these initiatives? Is the primary goal hard outcomes (i.e., financial performance) or oriented toward softer values (e.g., well-being or a sense of belonging)?
7. (Frequency) How frequently do bubble hops occur?
8. (Format) What is the format of the bubble hops, where do they take place?
9. (Timing) When in time do they occur?
10. (Target) Who participates? What is the target group, and how are participants selected?

Evaluation

11. Earlier you mentioned the purpose of these initiatives. How do you assess whether they fulfill their intended goals? How do you measure the effects?
12. Do the effects differ depending on the participants? For example, is there a group that appreciates these initiatives more or less than others?
13. What do you think works well with these initiatives?
14. What challenges have you encountered in implementing these programs, and how have they been addressed?
15. Describe the organisational and individual challenges.

16. How do you think these initiatives could develop in the future?
17. If you were to design a bubble hop initiative – how would you do it and who would you involve?
18. What role does leadership play in ensuring the success of these initiatives?

Appendix B: AI Transparency Note

Four AI tools were utilized in the writing process with the intention to improve quality and efficiency. The following outlines which tools were used and to what extent:

Microsoft Teams AI, Klang AI: Used for text transcription of online meetings.

ChatGPT: Used as a support tool throughout the thesis process. In the research phase, it assisted with creating Boolean search strings for Scopus and generating ideas for potential research areas. It also supported various non-writing tasks such as drafting emails to interviewees and structuring the analysis workbook using Excel formulas. Additionally, it was used to translate interview quotes from Swedish to English, assist with initial stages of coding selected quotes, and refine text for clarity and conciseness.

Grammarly: Used to enhance grammatical accuracy, improve flow, and increase overall clarity.

The authors acknowledge potential risks with the use of various AI tools such as misinformation and overreliance. These were addressed through critical reflection, verification of facts, and careful consideration of when and how AI was used. All tools were used in compliance with GDPR and with respect for sensitive data.

The authors take full responsibility for the content of the final thesis, including all interpretations, conclusions, and phrasing.