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More Than Just Delegation: The Intersection of Managerial Task Allocation and Employee's Self-Selection

An Exploratory Study of Managers' Reasoning and Management-Independent Factors Driving Task Distribution in a Swedish Multinational Industrial Company

Kira Anais Anger (42570) and Joel Klefbom Ridderstråle (50547)

Abstract. The distribution of tasks within organizations impacts firm performance as well as personal outcomes for employees. In this context, managers play a crucial role, matching tasks with employees in the most productive way. Combining the resource-based view (RBV) and role theory (RT) into a first integrative framework, we explore how managers reason about who to choose when delegating tasks, and which other factors play a role in task distribution. By interviewing 22 employees, we investigate the distribution process within a multinational industrial company in Sweden from a managerial perspective. We find that when tasks occur, managers subjectively classify them and select the most suitable employee through a managerial assessment process. While objective employee qualities indicate who could succeed at the respective tasks, several informing factors impact and potentially bias this process. Our findings are in line with existing theory, while newly adding the manager's perception of fairness as influencing the assessment criteria of employees as resources. Besides a manager choosing an employee directly, we identified two management-independent mechanisms of allocation, where employees are assigned automatically, volunteer for, or initiate tasks themselves. This behavior is driven by the employee's self-perception (potentially self-categorization) and the reputation they want to build (potentially impression management). The (self-driven) behavior of employees can inform the managerial assessment process through observations, potentially reinforcing biased and unequal distribution patterns. Thus, we recommend managers to consider potential biases when delegating tasks, employees to carefully choose their tasks, and organizations to establish relevant development programs and information systems.

Keywords: Managerial task allocation, Resource-based view, Role theory, Self-selection, Task classification, Task distribution

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Discussant(s): Tuva Löfving and Emma Iversén
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Definitions

Term	*Definition*
Knowledge Workers	Knowledge workers create value through the transformation of representations into cognitive processes. Performing complex tasks, knowledge workers typically engage in problem-solving with the goal to create and distribute knowledge through organizations. Therefore, they have acquired a lot of knowledge, often through university education and/or experiences (Surawski, 2019).
Non-promotable Tasks	"Tasks that matter to the organization but do not advance the career of the individual who completes them. Non-promotable tasks are not instrumental to increasing the organization's currency, are often not visible, and may not require specialized skills (many others can do them)." (Babcock et al., 2022, p. 253)
Norms	"Expectations about how people will or should behave." (Babcock et al., 2022, p. 253)
Organizational Citizenship Behavior	Behavior supporting the environment in which tasks are being performed, positively contributing to it in social and psychological aspects but not necessarily recognized by others (Podsakoff et al., 2009).
Perception	Subjective observations which might not reflect reality but rather the perspective an individual has on their experiences or environment (Arsel, 2017). They can be based on biased assumptions and/or associations (Bertrand, 2018).
Promotability of a Task (Continuum)	"The more promotable a task, the more likely it is to advance the employee's career in terms of pay, performance evaluations, promotions, and status. Tasks low in promotability have little impact on career advancement, with the opposite holding true for tasks high in promotability." (Babcock et al., 2022, p. 253)

Promotable Tasks	"Tasks that lead to career advancement. Promotable tasks are: closely aligned with organizational currency, visible, and often require specialized skills that can differentiate an employee from others. Tasks that prepare the employee for future promotable work are indirectly promotable." (Babcock et al., 2022, p. 254)
Resource	In the resource-based view, a firm's resources include physical as well as intangible assets, including its employees (Boxall, 1996; Penrose, 2009).
Role	A role is a position or function within a social structure, which is associated with expectations that build social standards and prescriptive norms. The appropriateness of behavior is then evaluated against the expectations connected to the role. Individuals can hold a range of roles and multiple roles simultaneously (Anglin et al., 2022).
Role-based Expectations	Expectations connected to the role an individual holds. If an individual holds several roles, the expectations might contradict, which makes it challenging to act in line with the standards and norms connected to all roles simultaneously (Anglin et al., 2022; Eagly & Karau, 2002).
Role Congruence	Role Congruence describes behaving in line with the expectations connected to a specific role (Anglin et al., 2022). The contrary is true for role incongruence and incongruent behavior potentially leads to social penalties (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Babcock et al., 2022).
Stereotypes	Inference of the typical traits of individuals through the direct or indirect observation of behaviors of people in the same role as the individual seemingly has (Eagly et al., 2019).
Task	Visible or invisible activities someone engages in, which require different competencies and amounts of time to succeed in. By

engaging in different tasks, individuals can gain more or less benefits within organizations (Babcock et al., 2022).

List of Abbreviations

NPT.	Non-promotable task
PT.	Promotable task
RBV.	Resource-based view
RT.	Role Theory

1. Introduction

With this first section, we aim to provide the reader with the Background (1.1.) of the study, before explaining the Purpose and Expected Contribution (1.2.). Afterwards, we present our Research Questions (1.3.) and Delimitations (1.4.).

1.1. Background

Within organizations, managers and employees typically hold several roles simultaneously. These roles are connected to their gender, job function, or position within the organization, etc. (Badura et al., 2018; Livingston, 2014; Matta et al., 2015). Following role theory (RT), every role comes with specific and potentially conflicting expectations (Anglin et al., 2022). Thus, stereotypes and biases associated with one role might impact the individual's outcomes in another role (Anglin et al., 2022). This becomes problematic when individuals in the same official job role are being treated differently because of the stereotypes connected to their other roles. Several researchers have investigated how especially women are subject to negative stereotypes that influence the tasks that they are being delegated, also known as task segregation (Babcock et al., 2022; Bechthold, 2015; Bertrand, 2018; Bircan et al., 2024; Huff, 1990).

Managers hold a crucial position in task segregation since they are responsible for the implementation of strategy while also serving as supervisors and scouts for talents, advancing the goals and success of the firm by allocating employees to different tasks (Harding et al., 2014; Vaiman et al., 2012). The resource-based view (RBV) dictates that managers should allocate their resources in the most productive way. This reasoning includes their employees, who can provide different services, which respectively provide more or less value to the company (Lockett et al., 2009; Penrose, 2009). However, the managers' selection of an employee for a specific task can be subjective, and incorrect allocations do not only have negative consequences for the firm, but also for the individual (Babcock et al., 2022; Lockett et al., 2009; Penrose, 2009).

Previous research shows that being assigned different tasks within the same job role causes employees to develop differing skill sets and leads to unequal workload distributions. Consequently, some employees require additional time off, which takes away valuable resources from the company and can negatively impact the employees' job satisfaction, thereby

increasing the turnover of disadvantaged employees (Chan & Anteby, 2016; Mathebula & Barnard, 2020). Moreover, the unequal allocation of tasks can lead to resentment and tensions within the workforce, causing employees to disengage, decreasing team morale, satisfaction, and productivity, while restricting growth and development of the individual (Bechtold, 2015; Chan & Anteby, 2016; Mathebula & Barnard, 2020). Distributing tasks consciously and evenly, on the other hand, can help organizations in the achievement of key business objectives and consequently drive firm growth. By utilizing the workforce efficiently, companies can retain valuable employees, attract the best talent, and transfer knowledge and skills to improve employees' confidence (Babcock et al., 2022; Mathebula & Barnard, 2020; Prendergast & Topel, 1996).

Since the allocation of tasks can have far-reaching consequences, we want to understand how managers, with their crucial role in task distribution, reason about who to choose when delegating tasks, and which other factors play a role in task distribution. Existing studies have provided us with fragmented insights into individual factors influencing delegation decisions within companies (Babcock et al., 2017; Bechtold, 2015; Bircan et al., 2024; Dansereau et al., 1975; De Pater et al., 2010; Eagly et al., 2019; Jha, 2004; Mathebula & Barnard, 2020; Oakley, 2000; Prendergast & Topel, 1996; Tsui et al., 1995). However, an integrated framework combining the different aspects is currently missing. Moreover, non-anonymous contexts like knowledge work in industrial settings can be described as under-researched in the literature connected to task segregation, offering a valuable opportunity to gain new insights (Babcock et al., 2017). By shedding light on the distribution process, we aim to enable managers to consciously distribute tasks more efficiently and equally, thereby unlocking benefits for both individuals and organizations.

1.2. Purpose and Expected Contribution

This study aims to explore how managers reason about who to choose when delegating tasks and which other factors play a role in task distribution within a multinational industrial company in Sweden. Our expected contributions are twofold. Firstly, by leveraging RBV and RT, we expect to develop a first integrated framework of task distribution in non-anonymous real-life settings, closing a research gap identified by Babcock et al. (2017). By choosing a Swedish industrial company, we also expand existing research on task distribution to the currently relatively untouched field of knowledge work in industrial settings. Expected practical contributions include shedding light on the factors considered by managers when

delegating tasks, and other factors impacting the distribution of tasks. Thereby, we want to encourage managers, employees, and companies to reflect upon the far-reaching consequences of task allocation and enable them to make more conscious decisions. With this, we aim to contribute to the creation of more equal and efficient work environments, which not only boost firm performance but also drive positive outcomes for employees and equal opportunities for everyone.

1.3. Research Questions

To investigate the distribution of tasks within organizations and fulfill the stated purpose, we defined two research questions:

RQ 1: How do managers reason about who to choose when delegating tasks?

RQ2: Which other factors play a role in task distribution?

1.4. Delimitations

We made several delimitations to realize the purpose of this study. Firstly, our study adopts a binary view of gender (female and male) and does not consider other gender identities. We also do not consider themes of intersectionality (race, ethnicity, sexuality, etc.) and recognize that we might miss out on the experiences of those who are impacted in ways which we cannot predict. However, the foundational literature on task distribution is based on a binary understanding of gender, and thus, we prioritized theoretical consistency over nuanced inclusion (Babcock et al., 2017; Chan & Anteby, 2016). Moreover, while we assume that gender related findings in the relatively gender-equal country of Sweden might apply to less gender-equal countries, the other aspects of the study are delimited to Sweden only (Bell et al., 2022; European Institute for Gender Equality, 2024; Flyvbjerg, 2006). Finally, the study investigates a single multinational industrial company and does not offer insights into other corporate cultures or industries. Therefore, we delimit our results to established, multinational companies in the industrial sector. By focusing on a single company, we followed the existing tradition of research in the field (Bell et al., 2022; Chan & Anteby, 2016; Feldberg, 2022; Lester, 2008).

2. Literature Review

In the following section, we review the literature on Enabling Factors of Task Segregation (2.1.), The Influence of Stereotypes and Gendered Expectations on Task Distribution (2.2.), The Interplay of Task Promotability and Employee Gender (2.3.), and Personal and Relational Aspects in Task Distribution (2.4). It ends with a Synthesis and definition of the Research Gap (2.5.).

2.1. Enabling Factors of Task Segregation

While delegation can be described as "an enabler in organizations" (Mathebula & Barnard, 2020, p. 76), the assignment decision can be conscious or subconscious, and managers rarely know which exact factors they should consider to ensure effective task assignment (Babcock et al., 2022; Mathebula & Barnard, 2020). Wondering what leads to employees in the same job role doing different tasks, Chan and Anteby (2016) proposed a first process model of task segregation, investigating the subjective and material outcomes of within-job inequality for the employee. Through interviews with employees of the Transportation Security Administration in the United States, they identified three conditions that enable task segregation at an organizational level. These include discrete task boundaries, high managerial control over the workers' job content and task allocation, and context specific rationalizing conditions. In the chosen intensity case, policy demanded that tasks had to be matched with a worker group based on a specific characteristic, in this case gender. However, they mention that in other contexts, task segregation might be caused by implicit and informal expectations connected to the gender of the workers (Chan & Anteby, 2016).

2.2. The Influence of Stereotypes and Gendered Expectations on Task Distribution

Even if some researchers argue that managers mainly delegate tasks to subordinates who they perceive as competent to complete the task (Jha, 2004), their perception might be biased. Today, women are publicly seen as equally or more competent but as less agentic than their male colleagues. As leadership is still associated with higher agency, this public perception still hinders women from entering top hierarchies (Eagly et al., 2019). Stereotypically feminine traits "are associated with incompetence" (Oakley, 2000, p. 326). De Pater et al. (2010) already identified employee gender as biasing delegation decisions. Bircan et al. (2024) support this view with their findings that while male and female banking employees expressed the same levels of aspiration and demand, male bankers were advantaged by male directors, receiving

more relevant and visible assignments. Moreover, Budig (2022) identified that men are sometimes encouraged to take on more responsibility even against their will, in conformity with assumed masculine qualities.

2.3. The Interplay of Task Promotability and Employee Gender

Huff (1990) first recognized that women are not only disadvantaged in receiving promotable work assignments but often expected to take on more unrewarded work, then referred to as "wifely duties". Men seemingly do more visible work, while women work behind the scenes with fewer opportunities to learn, make essential contributions to organizational success, and earn recognition. While these tasks are often important for the function of the firm, they are less likely to be tied to overt organizational goals and advance women's careers. Women, or others, who take care of the organizational needs, seem to fall behind in terms of career progression, as their work and the time they put into it often remains unnoticed (Huff, 1990). Chan and Anteby (2016) reframed this observation by shedding light on organizationally legitimate tasks that are central to a job and thus not invisible, but different in desirability or demonstrating required skills for a promotion. Thereby, they identified a central mechanism of within-job inequality.

Babcock et al. (2017) further conceptualized this mechanism as "non-promotable tasks" (NPTs), which they define as beneficial to the organization but "less likely to affect [...] evaluation and career advancements" (Babcock et al., 2017, p. 714) in demarcation to "promotable tasks" (PTs). NPTs rarely require or build specific skills and are often associated with a low status (Babcock et al., 2022). Employees who spend more time on NPTs find themselves relatively disadvantaged compared to those who avoid these tasks. With their work, Babcock et al. (2017), advanced the understanding of how tasks with low promotability are assigned and found that women were asked more often to perform these tasks, while also accepting more requests to perform them across industries and professions. They relate this to gendered expectations and showed how it negatively impacts women's careers and organizational outcomes (Babcock et al., 2017; Chu et al., 2022). Adding to this, a "task bind" as defined by Feldberg (2022), occurs when individuals perceive negative stereotypes about their ability to complete a task, leading to them trying to disprove those negative stereotypes by showcasing their qualifications. In the context of Feldberg's (2022) study, this led to female supermarket managers focusing on working in front of subordinates, which took away their time from more essential tasks in the office. Their male colleagues, however, were not affected

by a task bind, and could focus on the promotable work. Thus, gendered expectations and task bind seemingly lead women to perform the same job differently compared to their male colleagues.

2.4. Personal and Relational Aspects in Task Distribution

Besides the gendered expectations, personal preferences and manager personality can impact task distribution. Prendergast and Topel (1996) investigated the effects of favoritism within organizations and found that less favored subordinates receive less productive job assignments. Bechtold (2015), pointed out that managers with insecurities about their own abilities usually prefer to delegate tasks to subordinates who have similar self-image issues. However, this seems to stem from defaulting to similar employees rather than actively advancing their careers, as it increases the overall workload of employees and not necessarily their promotability (Bechtold, 2015).

Mathebula and Barnard (2020) found evidence for managers delegating tasks to subordinates based on who they trust. Similarly, Dansereau et al. (1975) found that the relationships between a team leader and their team members are individual and different from one another. These relationships are established over time, where members may either fulfill only formal prescriptions to keep their employment and earn money, leaving them outside the “cadre”, or enter the “cadre” by engaging in an interpersonal exchange relationship, committing to organizational success by spending more time and energy at work. Thereby, the leader becomes dependent on them and consequently interested in investing more time and effort into the personal development of the cadre. Moreover, the cadre members get better access to information and differing task assignments, while they also engage in more organizational citizenship behavior (Dansereau et al., 1975; Tsui et al., 1995).

2.5. Synthesis and Research Gap

Existing work has investigated the mechanisms of task segregation by identifying enabling factors (Chan & Anteby, 2016) and, in a fragmentary way, provided us with an overview of the aspects influencing managers’ delegation decisions with a special focus on gender-bias. While some argue managers would choose the most competent employee (Jha, 2004), others assert that the manager’s perception is biased through stereotypical expectations (Bircan et al., 2024; De Pater et al., 2010; Eagly et al., 2019; Oakley, 2000). Babcock et al. (2017) further contend that these stereotypes may also be applicable when assigning tasks that require little to no

competencies, and the scholars identified internalized expectations as key drivers in women volunteering more for NPTs. Finally, favoritism (Prendergast & Topel, 1996), the manager's self-image (Bechtold, 2015), trust (Mathebula & Barnard, 2020), and individual relationships (Dansereau et al., 1975; Tsui et al., 1995) have been found to influence who the manager chooses for which task, but also which tasks an employee takes on themselves. Nevertheless, there is not yet an integrated framework outlining how a manager reasons about who to choose when assigning different tasks to their individual employees, nor a clear overview of the other factors influencing the distribution of tasks within organizations.

Existing studies have focused on academia (Bircan et al., 2024), the public sector (Chan & Anteby, 2016; Chu et al., 2022), online games (Grant & Shandell, 2022), the service industry (Jha, 2004), grocery store managers (Feldberg, 2022), or anonymous contexts (Babcock et al., 2017). Babcock et al. (2017) found field evidence for gender impacting the distribution of NPTs in non-anonymous environments where a reputation can be built and called for future research to investigate this further. So far, the realities of knowledge workers in an industrial setting have been neglected by research on task distribution and separation.

Chan and Anteby (2016) and Feldberg (2022) focused their work on directly job-related tasks but ignored cross-department tasks and office housework (Babcock et al., 2022; Bertrand, 2018; Huff, 1990). As mentioned, these NPTs might be important to the organization but they disadvantage the responsible employee. Therefore, it is crucial to understand how all different kinds of tasks are distributed throughout an organization. While this holistic view of tasks is not yet widely adopted in the literature, we deem it relevant to uncover systematic inequalities within organizations.

With this study, we aim to combine existing theories into an integrated framework for how managers reason about who to choose when distributing tasks in organizations and what other factors play a role in the distribution process based on existing literature and new empirical findings. We want to advance the field by combining existing theories in a new way and aim to extend the existing literature to new contexts in terms of industry. Further, we aim to increase the understanding of task delegation in organizations and thereby enable decision makers to question and possibly alter beliefs, improve organizational processes and management practices, and contribute to equal opportunities for everyone to unlock the positive consequences of a more even task distribution (Babcock et al., 2017).

3. Theory

In the following section, we elaborate upon relevant concepts within the Resource-Based View (3.1.) and Role Theory (3.2.). The section ends with a synthesis of our chosen Theoretical Framework (3.3.).

3.1. Resource-Based View

RBV allocates differences in firm performance to different ways of utilizing resources within organizations (Lockett et al., 2009). Thus, possessing a resource does not automatically lead to a higher performance. Instead, a single resource can be used for several potential services, where some services provide more value to the organization than others (Lockett et al., 2009; Penrose, 2009). Therefore, the manager has to identify the most promising opportunities for firm growth, define a strategy, and match the available resources accordingly (Lockett et al., 2009). Following Penrose's (2009) argumentation, this way of reasoning applies equally to material resources and human resources. Integrating ideas from strategic human resource management, Boxall (1996) further elaborates that organizations can gain a competitive "human resource advantage" by hiring, retaining, and developing the best talents, as well as combining their different contributions in better collaboration processes. Consequently, managers play a crucial role in the firm's success, given their responsibility to allocate employees in the most profitable way (Lockett et al., 2009).

Following RBV, when assigning tasks to employees, managers should aim to optimize labor productivity (Bailly & Dubrion, 2025; Lockett et al., 2009). Therefore, they should "maximize the interplay of their talents" (Boxall, 1996, p. 67), by considering the employee's "resource functionality" (Lockett et al., 2009, p. 12), i.e. their abilities and competencies to succeed in the tasks. This should be combined with considerations of the individual workload capacity of the employee, and the profitability of using one service of an employee at the cost of another (Bailly & Dubrion, 2025; Jha, 2004; Lockett et al., 2009; Penrose, 2009). To prevent talent turnover and drive firm growth, managers should also provide sufficient talent development opportunities for employees to attain new abilities and knowledge in line with their potential (Bailly & Dubrion, 2025; Boxall, 1996; Lockett et al., 2009). After employees have developed new abilities, managers should reconsider their task allocation accordingly (Lockett et al., 2009).

The manager's perception of both an employee's abilities and the circumstances within and outside the firm, however, can be subjective and based on previous experiences (Lockett et al., 2009; Penrose, 2009). This can lead to incorrect allocations with negative consequences for firm outcome (Bailly & Dubrion, 2025). To understand how the manager's perception might be biased, we refer to RT in the next section.

3.2. Role Theory

RT investigates how different roles influence individual behavior and the perception of behavior. A role can be defined as a position or function within a social structure, which is associated with expectations that build social standards and prescriptive norms. The appropriateness of behavior is then evaluated against the expectations connected to the role. Individuals can hold a range of roles and multiple roles simultaneously (Anglin et al., 2022). Some examples are gender roles (Badura et al., 2018), career roles based on their job function (e.g., in sales, or financial services) (Livingston, 2014), or status roles as supervisor or subordinate (Matta et al., 2015). If individuals hold several roles with opposing expectations, acting in line with the standards and norms connected to both roles might be challenging. Role incongruent behavior can then lead to social penalties, e.g., in the form of difficulties for women to access and succeed in leadership positions and negative attitudes towards female leaders (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

3.2.1. Stereotypical and Biased Expectations

Through direct and indirect observation of people's behavior in specific roles, others develop beliefs about the typical traits of people in this role, leading to the formation of stereotypes and biases (Eagly et al., 2019). Stereotypes and biases connected to one role (often gender role) might influence the perception of an individual's abilities in their other role (often functional role), which might impact the individual's outcomes (Anglin et al., 2022). Research further suggests that negative stereotypes against women still impact their outcomes in terms of task delegation (Babcock et al., 2022; Bechtold, 2015; Bertrand, 2018; Bircan et al., 2024; Huff, 1990), promotions (Budig, 2022), and access to top management positions (Oakley, 2000). Thus, a manager's perception of an employee's abilities can potentially be biased by internalized stereotypes connected to the role the individual holds (Anglin et al., 2022). The influence of stereotypes is especially prevalent under time pressure and uncertainty, as they enable quick decision-making by skipping the often time-consuming logical reasoning, possibly leading to biased decisions (Ayyappan et al., 2025).

3.2.2. Task Classification in the Context of Role Theory

As mentioned, Babcock et al. (2017) established the terminology of PTs and NPTs while also drawing a connection between the classification of tasks as NPTs and the role concepts described above. In line with gender congruence, they argue that women are perceived as the better fit for NPTs because they are still seen as more supportive and communal (Babcock et al., 2017; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Eagly et al., 2022). Existing stereotypes about the status and abilities of women are in line with their definition of NPTs requiring little skill and being low in status. Nevertheless, good intentions connected to stereotypes can also lead to an overload of NPTs for women. For example, women might be asked to participate in committee work to diversify the discussions, taking valuable time from them while their male colleagues can work on PTs (Babcock et al., 2022).

Babcock et al. (2017) point out that women are not only assigned more NPTs, but they also volunteer more often for these tasks. This is generally not due to individual preferences, but rather due to internalized stereotypical expectations on women to sacrifice their time for the benefit of the team. With society having internalized this behavior, if women decline PT or NPT requests, they often face social penalties and retaliation in "work assignments, collaborations, performance evaluations, reputation, and compensation" (Babcock et al., 2022, p. 67) as it is perceived as role-incongruent behavior (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Men, on the other hand, receive positive evaluations for helping, but neutral evaluations for not doing so (Babcock et al., 2022). Consequently, asking for volunteers becomes a central mechanism in the unequal allocation of NPTs because it triggers the explained volunteering gap (Babcock et al., 2017).

Since stereotypes are formed through observations, organizational processes and structures can influence and reinforce unfair distributions through the reinforcement of gender roles and norms (Conzon, 2023; Eagly et al., 2019; Lester, 2008; Llorens et al., 2021). If men within an organization have typically been assigned responsibilities while women remain invisible, it creates and reinforces expectations of how they should behave and interact in the future (Lester, 2008; Llorens et al., 2021). Getting assigned more NPTs, women might be perceived as less productive compared to their male colleagues, which seemingly makes it more efficient to allocate even more NPTs to them. Thus, they get punished for performing more NPTs. Reinforcing this effect, if women perform such tasks well, an efficiency focus dictates they

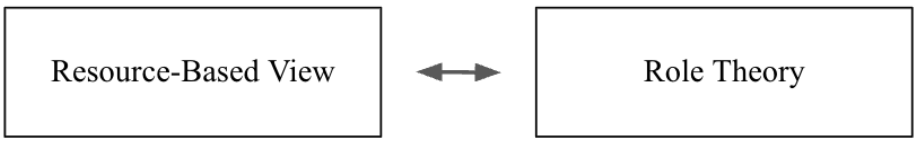
should get even more NPTs, which leaves them doubly punished (Babcock et al., 2022). These organizationally constructed gender roles have "the potential to hide and naturalize inequitable practices" (Lester, 2008, p. 298), causing women, and not men, to be top of mind when assigning NPTs (Babcock et al., 2022).

3.3. Theoretical Framework

By combining RBV and RT, we want to understand the reasoning of managers about who to choose when distributing tasks to their employees, as well as what other factors might play a role in the allocation of tasks. Figure 1 aims to visualize the interconnection between RBV and RT, i.e. between the manager's subjective assessment of their employees and the influence of role-based expectations and task classification on said assessment. We further dive into this during our empirical analysis.

Figure 1

Theoretical Framework



4. Methodology

The following section aims to guide the reader through the scientific research approach and process applied in this study. We introduce our Methodological Fit (4.1.), Study Design (4.2.), and Data Analysis Process (4.3.), and present the means we applied to increase the Quality of the Study (4.4.).

4.1. Methodological Fit

This study started with the discovery of Babcock et al.'s (2017) article, which coined the term "non-promotable tasks" and pointed out a clear research gap, namely the extension of their research on the distribution of NPTs "to non-anonymous settings that allow for the possibility of reputation building" (Babcock et al., 2017, p. 743). Following this idea, we searched for related literature and found fragmented explanations for task distribution as elaborated above. Consequently, we could not ignore previous work on the distribution of tasks, while we

simultaneously found the area to be emerging and under-researched – especially in non-anonymous business contexts, like knowledge work in industrial settings. This led to the choice of an abductive research approach, where the existing literature was reviewed to gain an initial understanding of potential factors of influence before collecting any data, and revisited throughout the empirical process when other potential explanations emerged from the data. Engaging with the literature and empirical data simultaneously enabled us to pragmatically and gradually refine the identification and selection of existing explanations, where existing theories were combined in a novel way rather than developing an entirely new theory (Bell et al., 2019). A deductive approach would not have allowed for the theoretical flexibility required at this maturity stage of the research area. Here, several potential explanations have to be identified and challenged first, before they can be tested deductively in the future (Arsel, 2017; Bell et al., 2019). On the other hand, an inductive approach would ignore the crucial theoretical contributions which this study is based on (Bell et al., 2019).

Assuming that the actions and understandings of humans construct organizations and cultures, we took a constructionist ontological position. Thus, we assume social phenomena like the distribution of tasks to be influenced by social actors (Bell et al., 2022). In line with this reasoning, we adopted an interpretivist epistemology, assuming that reality does not exist objectively but is rather influenced "by human action and meaning-making" (Bell et al., 2022, p. 234). The social world can consequently be explained from the subjective viewpoint of individuals, and organizations can be understood through the experiences of the actors within them (Arsel, 2017; Bell et al., 2022). To capture this subjective perspective, we chose a qualitative research approach over a quantitative one since it is especially suitable for the study of phenomena that are difficult to capture in numbers. This includes personal experiences and observations of individuals as well as the rationale of decision makers beyond simply the impacts their decisions have (Bell et al., 2022; Conzon, 2023; Edmondson & McManus, 2007). This contributed to our choice of semi-structured interviews, as they enable a deep understanding of individuals' experiences and subjective realities. By keeping the interview open and utilizing follow-up questions, we wanted to collect detailed descriptions and rich answers. This facilitated deeper insights and a contextual understanding, eliminating ambiguities and enabling future research to progress faster (Bell et al, 2022; Welch et al., 2011). Another reason was that the required data for a quantitative research design is unavailable in our chosen business setting, as they do not track the reasoning delegation decisions in any way.

Thus, it would require a joint effort of the company and us as researchers to collect this data, which was not possible in the limited time frame of this research project.

4.2. Study Design

We conducted all interviews within a single case company, a well-established and leading multinational industrial corporation headquartered in Sweden. The rationale behind choosing a single company was to follow a tradition of observing the dynamic of task distribution within one organization, typical for the studies our research is based on (Bell et al., 2022; Chan & Anteby, 2016; Feldberg, 2022; Lester, 2008). Moreover, studying a single company instead of a big sample enables a "multiple wealth of details" (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 223) within a specific real-life context. This allows us to develop a nuanced contextual perspective on human behavior, in line with our focus on the manager's subjective rationale behind decisions. The specific company was strategically selected as a critical case, aiming for generalizability of our findings even from a small sample (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Focusing only on the Swedish unit of the company, we purposefully chose one of the most gender equal societies in the world, with a relatively low gender pay-gap, high educational and professional attainment for women, generous and equal parental leave policies and more (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2024). Moreover, the company has initiated several diversity, equality, and inclusion programs. These characteristics were deemed ideal to form a "least likely" case, where the influence of gender, which in other settings has been found to impact the distribution of tasks, is supposed to be least likely to occur. Thus, if gender is found to be a main factor of influence in this case, it potentially impacts task distribution "for all (or many)" (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 230) companies (Flyvbjerg, 2006). With this strategic choice, we aim to create the biggest learning opportunity for understanding the role of gender within the distribution of tasks (Bell et al., 2022; Flyvbjerg, 2006).

4.2.1. Sampling

In total, we contacted 48 employees and conducted 22 interviews, with an even gender distribution. Additional information regarding the interviews can be found in Appendix 1, where all interviewees have been anonymized with pseudonyms and generalized department names. We did not aim for a representative sample, but rather sought out to strategically gather participants that could provide the most insights (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). Vaiman et al. (2012) describe the manager as a talent scout, who has the decision power over who gets which task. Harding et al. (2014) further suggest that managers implement strategies by controlling

others but are also controlled by both organizational boundaries and their own superiors. Consequently, they control who gains visibility within the organization but are simultaneously subject to the same conditions, which makes them interesting subjects when exploring the mechanisms behind task distribution (Babcock et al. 2022; Mathebula & Barnard, 2020). Further, we aimed for a balanced sample of both female and male managers. In line with our abductive approach, this allowed us to investigate potential patterns which might or might not lead to new findings without committing to an idea too early, whereas a homogeneous sample would not have allowed for this (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012).

After deciding upon the selection criteria for our interview participants, we reached out to two well connected employees, who we identified based on their role description from the internal employee register to which we had access. Neither of them holds a managerial role, but their position requires them to work with diverse employees across the whole organization. Therefore, they seemed suitable to ask for a list of managers from diverse departments to reach out to for interviews. To ensure data access early on, we then reached out to all 18 recommended managers, out of which 11 agreed to participate in our study. At the time of us receiving the list, all suggested candidates were managers in various departments throughout the case company. However, during the period of data collection, two participants switched roles, leaving their managerial position. In these instances, we relied on previous experiences, as the switch happened very close to the date of the interviews.

Our access to the internal employee network enabled us to identify and contact 19 further suitable candidates. Additionally, we asked our interview partners for personal references, applying the “snowballing” approach and gathering 11 additional interview leads (Bell et al., 2022). Gathering the sample, we aimed to reach theoretical saturation, where interviews are conducted until no new, relevant insights regarding the topic under investigation can be derived, the dimensions and properties of categories are established, and their relationships are well understood. After the 19th interview, we felt that no further insights were derived as the interviewees referred to the same mechanisms in similar ways. However, “to prove the density of the study” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 212), we conducted three more interviews which showed similar results and ensured a gender balanced sample (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

4.2.2. Data Collection

We contacted all participants via email, asking for an hour of their time along with their consent to participate in our study and their anonymized data being processed by us (Appendix II). All interviews took place online via Microsoft Teams to facilitate the recording of audio and automatic transcription, and to give the participants more flexibility in terms of time and location of the interview. We asked all participants at the start of the interview if they consented to be recorded, and all interviews were conducted in English. If an interviewee could not find the right words, they used their mother tongue, which we were able to understand and translate during the refinement of the interview transcripts.

4.2.2.1. Preparatory Work

To prepare for our interviews, we leveraged the interview guide from Chan and Anteby (2016), since their research topic and methodological approach was similar to ours. Additionally, we created original questions designed specifically for our study to be more targeted in our interviews, utilizing works by Arsel (2017) and Bell et al. (2022). The interview guide was divided into two parts, firstly focusing on the manager managing their own team and secondly focusing on the manager as members of the management team. Thereby, we aimed to get first-hand data on the decision process of each manager, but also external reflections on how other managers are perceived to allocate tasks. In doing so, we tried to circumvent the "bias in bias recognition" as outlined by Wang and Jeon (2020, p. 1), who argue that people believe others to be more biased than themselves. Thus, with this two-sided approach of interviewing managers who both have a supervisor and are themselves supervising employees, we pursued more honest insights into task delegation compared to solely relying on descriptions of their own behavior, which might be more favorable than reality. We conducted two pilot interviews with the employees who provided us with the list of potential interviewees to rehearse and test the questions, as well as to adjust the wording to our case company. After each of them, we iterated upon our questionnaire first separately and then jointly. Moreover, an expert in qualitative research design and interviewing advised us on how to refine our interview guide and what areas to focus on given the scope and topic of our research.[1]

[1] Referring to Katja Einola, Associate Professor at the Department of Management and Organization at the Stockholm School of Economics and supervisor to this study.

4.2.2.2. Semi-structured Interviews

The interviews were performed in a semi-structured fashion, similar to the studies by Conzon (2023) and Chan and Anteby (2016). The interview guide enabled us to steer the discussion to our areas under investigation and ensured that the data is comparable across interviews. However, the semi-structured approach also allowed for spontaneous altering of the questions and the order, letting us probe on statements and contradictions rather than strictly following the interview guide. This enabled conversations and discussions rather than interrogations (Arsel, 2017). We conducted 18 interviews together, taking turns in asking questions and taking notes. This enabled us to ask more specific follow-up questions while also actively engaging in the interview. Due to scheduling reasons, during four of the interviews only one researcher was present. Immediately after every interview, we reflected individually and jointly about the interview process and the impressions we got, also noting down interesting non-verbal insights. After every five interviews, answers and themes were analyzed so that questions could be revised throughout the process, ensuring that the interviewees' experiences would guide the abductive research process rather than our theoretical assumptions (Gioia et al., 2013). In total, after the pilot interviews, we made four iterations to the interview guide, changing the number, order, and focus of the questions. The final version can be found as Appendix III.

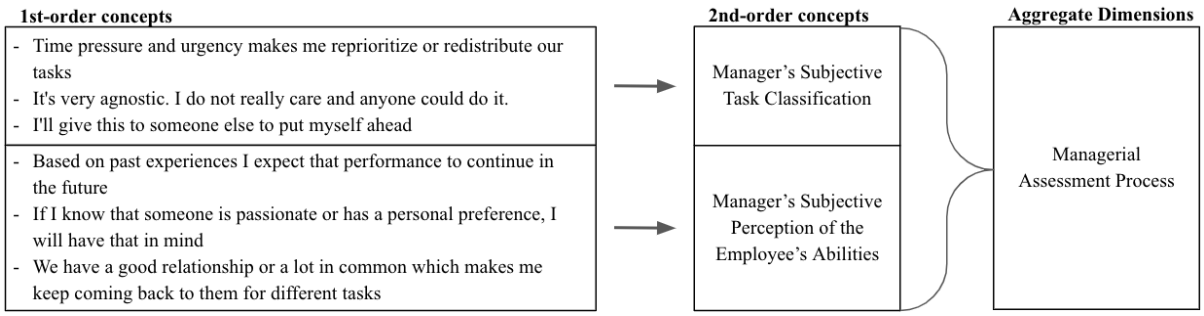
4.3. Data Analysis Process

The data analysis process followed the grounded theory approach by Gioia et al. (2013). In line with our methodological assumptions, this approach "captures concepts relevant to the human organizational experience" (Gioia et al., 2013, p. 16), enabling us to adequately bring together the subjective perspective of our interviewees and the existing theory about the phenomenon at hand. Firstly, both of us reviewed the transcripts separately, identifying recurring topics emerging from the interviews in NVivo 15. Staying as close as possible to the informant terms to avoid premature interpretations, we accumulated a total of 87 topics. Afterwards, we moved our codebooks into a shared spreadsheet to facilitate the comparison of and alignment on common patterns. Where our interpretations of passages differed, we revisited the original transcripts and engaged in discussions to find "consensual interpretations" (Gioia et al., 2013, p. 22). Merging the identified topics into categories with informant-centric phrasal descriptions, we arrived at 29 final first-order concepts. In line with our abductive approach, we then revisited relevant literature to understand where the findings would match or differ from existing concepts. The theoretical insights from RBV and RT were then used to define second-order themes, distilling concepts that could help us explain the distribution of tasks in

organizations from a managers' perspective in tandem with the existing literature (Gioia et al., 2013). Once we agreed on 11 second-order themes, we defined four second-order aggregate dimensions; Managerial Assessment Process, Objective Employee Qualities, Informing Factors, and Management-Independent Allocation. During this process, we constantly questioned our categorization and critiqued our own coding by revisiting all transcripts, with the final first-order concepts, second order themes, and aggregate dimensions in mind, ensuring consistency among them. In Figure 2, we provide an extract of our data structure. The complete graphic representation of how we moved from the raw data concepts to themes and dimensions can be found in Appendix IV.

Figure 2

Extract of Data Structure



4.4. Quality of the Study

To demonstrate the trustworthiness of our study, we elaborate in the following sections on how we worked towards ensuring Credibility (4.4.1.), Transferability (4.4.2.), Dependability (4.4.3.), Conformability (4.4.4.), and our own Ethical Considerations (4.4.5.). The presented criteria were taken from Bell et al. (2022), as measures of trustworthiness for qualitative research.

4.4.1. Credibility

To ensure that our results are an acceptable representation of the data, we sent the refined transcripts to every participant, requesting a voluntary member check. This enabled them to review their transcripts for accurate representation of their experiences and correction of any misunderstandings before we moved on to the analysis of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Moreover, by conducting the majority of the interviews together, we could jointly reflect upon our impressions and the findings and challenge each other's potentially biased assumptions and

subjective interpretations. Finally, the interviews lasted between 49 min and 1 hr 25 min, with an average of 1 hr 6 min. This enabled us to ask many follow-up questions and engage in deep discussions with our interview partners, increasing the quality of our data (Flint et al., 2002).

4.4.2. Transferability

While investigating several companies would have allowed for formal generalization, our strategic choice of a company with visible efforts towards gender equality and within a relatively gender equal society enables us to gain critical insights into the role of gender in the distribution of tasks (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Gioia et al., 2013). We applied theoretical sampling and consequently chose to interview both female and male managers from different departments and functions to strategically find participants who could contribute the most theoretical insights within our critical case company (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). Thus, we assume that findings for an unequal distribution in our critical case company should be extendable to other contexts in less gender equal cultures, and firms with fewer company-wide efforts towards gender equality (Flyvbjerg, 2006).

4.4.3. Dependability

We ensured the consistency of our findings by actively asking the interview participants to reflect on their current role, but also past experiences that they perceive as relevant. Consequently, they were able to reflect upon changing trends and actions that were taken to ensure equal task distribution over time. The average tenure of the participants was approximately 13 years within the case company, stretching from a minimum of three to a maximum of 35 years. In line with this, Ng and Feldman (2010) indicated that employees who have longer organizational tenure are usually more familiar with organizational procedures, norms, and the culture. Thus, we assume that the consistent narratives throughout all interviews are not unique to a specific point in time within the case company.

4.4.4. Confirmability

To ensure that our interpretations are derived from our participants and their experiences as opposed to being based on or influenced by our own biases, we followed the interview principles outlined by Arsel (2017). By iterating the interview guide several times on our own and with an expert in the field (see Footnote 1), we actively tried to limit the effect of our personal values on the participants as much as possible. Moreover, we structured the questions like a funnel, starting with open and non-guiding questions before diving into theory specific

questions. This enabled us to understand if specific concepts arise naturally in the interview or only after we approached the topic explicitly, being aware of the guidance which some of the ending questions contained (Arsel, 2017). Additionally, in accordance with Bell et al. (2022), we challenged each other to reflect on the research process and our inherent biases. As a diverse pair in terms of gender and nationalities, coming from Germany and Sweden, we practiced reflexivity to contemplate upon how our own positions might influence the data collection and analysis process. For all interviews that both of us attended and during the coding, we documented our thoughts and observations. This allowed for continuous comparison and refinement of our interpretations and the identification of potential biases, adding to the overall quality of our research (Charmaz, 2006).

4.4.5. Ethical Considerations

To ensure that no participant in our study was harmed, we ensured that all data was handled confidentially, and no personal data was shared with unapproved third parties, in line with GDPR. Both of us signed NDAs with the case company, making confidentiality a top priority of our study. We informed all participants upfront about how the data will be handled and analyzed and asked for consent to our data processing. Moreover, we let them know about the possibility to withdraw their consent at any time, leading to the permanent deletion of their data, which no interviewee made use of. All interviews were conducted using Microsoft Teams and the integrated automatic AI transcription tool. At the beginning of the interviews, every participant was again asked for consent to record the interview for transcription and data analysis purposes. Moreover, we informed them that they can always refuse to answer a question. After each interview, we downloaded the transcripts and saved them locally on both our computers, ensuring that they were not shared with any third party. During the manual refinement of the interview transcripts, the files were anonymized to ensure that the individual and the organization are not identifiable. Only then did we upload the anonymized files to the data analysis tool NVivo 15.

5. Empirical Analysis

In this section, we present our empirical findings following the data structure outlined above. Mirroring our methodological approach and derived aggregate dimensions, we structure the findings as follows: Managerial Assessment Process (5.1.), Objective Employee Qualities (5.2.), Informing Factors (5.3.), and Management-Independent Allocation (5.4.). Each

aggregate dimension is further structured in line with the respective second-order constructs, as visually outlined in Appendix IV. In Appendix V, we included a visual overview of how the first-order concepts were represented in each of our interviews, sorted by second-order concepts.

5.1. Managerial Assessment Process

5.1.1. Manager's Subjective Task Classification

We explicitly asked our interviewees how they distribute PTs and NPTs. However, none of our interviewees were familiar with the concept. While some mentioned PTs and NPTs using other words, e.g. "agnostic tasks" (F9) and "tasks in line with the development plan" (F1), most differed in their classification of which tasks are promotable, and which ones are not. This shows that all managers seem to have a subjective perspective on task classification, which we will further dive into in this part.

In 13 out of 22 interviews, time pressure and/or urgency were described as influencing the delegation decision. When a task needed to be done quickly, it seemed like most managers relied more on employees they know deliver fast, while without time pressure, they seemed to consider more long-term aspects connected to employee or team development.

"In a stressful situation, you don't have the possibility to think those strategic thoughts. You just think, ah, I need to solve this. I go to my go-to-person right away." - F7

"As long as it's not part of our key competence, I will use the fastest track, [rush through it as fast as possible with the right quality of course], but [if] we really need to learn about [a topic], then you could put it on someone [to] get the learning going [...] from scratch."- M9

Ten managers also mentioned that some tasks could be done by anyone. For these tasks, most managers said that they do not care about who does it, or that they are not sure about how these tasks are distributed within the team. In that case, the task allocation was more passive, and the manager put little energy into the selection of an employee.

"Have I considered everyone or did I automatically give it to someone I like best? I don't know, but sometimes it's also more the [gut] feeling that gives you a hint." - F4

"It's interesting. I never thought about [how NPTs are being distributed in our team]." - M3

Interestingly, six interviewees also indicated that they have seen managers either assign uninteresting tasks to others or distribute tasks to gain a personal benefit. This subjective understanding of the task then made them choose the respective person based on different criteria.

"Some of these things you delegate [...] for them to take [...] on the things that you either don't want to do or can't do or need support with." - M10

"You know that it's going to be rock solid and not dangerous for yourself [to give this task to a high performer who is not responsible for it]. It's just in the interest of yourself." - F9 (speaking about a situation she has observed, not her own behavior)

5.1.2. Manager's Subjective Perception of the Employee's Abilities

In almost all interviews, 21 out of 22, our interviewees indicated that they base their decision on past experiences with the employee, where previous good or bad performance was expected to indicate future performance. This often seemed to block out other considerations.

"So after that point, when the individual has proved themselves to that manager, it becomes more like [...] a type of favoritism where I'm going to delegate that to this person directly because she or he has done a great job at this before." - M10

A majority of our interviewees (15) also indicated that they would take the personal preferences and interests of their employees into consideration when assigning tasks. The interviewees perceive those tasks to be interesting to the respective employee and often expect these employees to perform better.

"For social activities, I think it's that type of thing where [...] I would ask someone that I know thinks those types of assignments are fun." - F5

"We have [a team member] who has shown interest in leadership and future management roles, so I tried to put some kind of internal leader role on him." - M3

"*People will do a good job if they're passionate about what they do and then we'll have a good delivery from our side."* - M9

Moreover, six of our interviewees explained that it can be easier to allocate tasks to employees who they have a lot in common with or a close relationship to. Similarities in personality or ways of working were in all cases described as something favorable, which made collaboration easier, caused managers to assign more fun tasks to the employee, or easier to assign tasks that were outside of the employee's responsibilities.

"I used to [...] just go to the same person all the time, and often it's a person that is similar to yourself. Like [...] you go to another person with the same personality, you are like clicking. You are working [well] together." - F7

"*I think that the closer the relationship I have with someone, the easier it is to ask them to take on tasks that may not be clearly within their area of responsibility."* - F6

5.2. Objective Employee Qualities

5.2.1. Employee's Capacity

In 18 cases, our interviewees mentioned that they choose the employee based on who is currently available, taking into consideration their individual workload and ensuring that no one is overburdened with the number of tasks. If the initially chosen person was already too occupied, most managers tried to find a suitable alternative.

"I think about [...] the balance of the projects that are already out there in the team. So who maybe has some extra bandwidth?" - M1

"If this high-achiever has too much to do, OK then we can put this task maybe on a low-achiever because it won't be a disaster if it's not done well." - M3

Moreover, 12 of our interviewed managers mentioned that they consider their employee's personal situation outside of work, as this might temporally affect the individual workload an employee can handle.

"She's pregnant, and that's why I don't want to overburden her [with a new request]." - F3

"I did have one [employee] who became overburdened [...] due to a health problem. And so she really didn't have the same capacity anymore [for some] time. [...] We went through her [...] whole schedule and had sort of an agreement on what she would put her time into and not." - F6

5.2.2. Profitability of Employment

Only two managers indicated that they consider the hourly rate of an employee when allocating tasks, taking the profitability of their choices for the company into account.

"I would say if it's a low-level job, [...] it's like where is it the cheapest for a company and whose hourly rate is the highest or lowest? Where would it be most beneficial to put this task?" - M3

A total of six managers indicated that they have to consider how to best use their time and reallocate tasks to their employees to work on other tasks they feel like they must do themselves as managers.

"The NPTs of course, I try to delegate as much as possible. Otherwise it doesn't work." - M11

"I cannot focus as much as I would like on task management. And that's [...] why the team leader role is crucial because that's sort of my backup to be able to have more focus in that area." - M3

5.2.3. Employee's Functionality

All interviewed managers (20) said that they would choose the most suitable person for a task by considering who has the competencies and experiences required to succeed, as defined by the manager depending on their understanding of the task.

"I would probably choose [this employee] only because I know that he is really good at [a required tool] and things like that. So he would have it automatically done without having to put any time into it. And it has nothing to do with his role but I know that he has the knowledge and competence." - F6

Interestingly, nine interviewees mentioned that they either were selected themselves or selected someone for a task only because this person had done the same task in the past.

"My manager asked, OK, you have done this [before], could you please give a proposal on how this could be done at [another location]." - F3

5.2.4. Capability Development

In 18 interviews, our interviewees mentioned that managers assign tasks based on the development needs of the individual employees, enabling them to learn and improve their abilities, which could potentially help their promotion. This was often dependent on perceived time pressure.

"And then it's also who is most suitable to do it both in terms of the prioritization in time and in terms of development [...]. If it's not a crucial thing but someone needs to develop within an area, maybe that's better than making it fast." - M6

Instead of considering the individual development needs, 14 managers mentioned that they want to build a strong team in the long term. Thus, they distribute tasks evenly within the team with the goal to have more people with the right skills to do it in the future. In this context, the managers mentioned skills connected to leading a team, presenting, or planning activities, but also holding the daily steering meeting or taking notes, so they decrease the dependency on individual employees.

"Maybe I would turn to someone that I would like to learn this [...] and take the opportunity to coach and onboard them, so I have more people that can do this task going forward." - F5

5.3. Informing Factors

5.3.1. Information Gathering

Half of our interviewees (11) indicated that they need employees to actively inform them about their personal situation or about what they are interested in doing, and/or learning. Otherwise, they would not be able to correctly assess these aspects when delegating a task.

"I expect that people take that responsibility and if they cannot, then they need to tell me." - F1

"Then the people are able to say, OK, I can take this for now but then in three months, I can't handle it anymore. So we need to talk about it in three months again." - F4

More than half of our interviewees (12) said that they have systems in place which enable them to understand their employee's feelings and needs. Those could be structured check-ins, or tools that ask for a workload indication.

"Since COVID we start every day with a briefing, so daily check-ins, 15 minutes. How is everyone feeling? What are they gonna do during the day? Does anybody need [...] help with anything?" - M1

"We created an Excel file and I asked everyone to fill it with the projects that they are having at the moment. Then we looked at it together and talked about it in the team but also in the one-on-one I talked to each and everyone. So how do you feel about it? Is it too much? Do you think you can manage all of this?" - F4

5.3.2. Good Intentions

While the exact definition of fairness differed slightly across the interviewed managers, 18 of them mentioned that they want to distribute tasks in a fair way. Some indicated that it is fair when everyone has the same amount of work, while others considered it crucial to consider the individual capacity of an employee based on their specific situation, including potential problems outside of work.

"[Regarding a fair task distribution,] I think that you should be treated in the same way, at least having the same attention and time with me as a manager." - M2

"[Regarding fairness,] I think it is important that not one person in the team is totally stressed out while another one in the team thinks it's quite boring, he doesn't have so much to do." - F4

Interestingly, two female managers explicitly stated that they actively assigned tasks to women to promote female representation and visibility. In that case, good intentions connected to gender equality were the driving factor for the delegation of a task.

"Anyone could speak about [our manufacturing]. I looked at the participant list and saw that they were all male, so I decided that it would be nice [to choose a woman from my management team] to show that we are not all male in [the production within the case company]." - F6

5.3.3. Role-based Expectation Biases and Stereotypes

In 15 interviews, the seniority of employees was associated with more experience or skills. Especially when expectations and time pressure were high, our interviewees seemed to rely on their senior employees more than their junior ones.

"I think we have stereotypical ideas of what types of tasks more senior employees versus more junior employees [...]can perform quickly, and sometimes they may not be true. You know, it's just an idea that we have [...]. I think that influences [us], even if we don't want it to." - F6

In more than half of all interviews (13), our interviewees reported that they were either asked to do more or different tasks only because they are women, or that they saw how women were asked to do so. The tasks were mostly to answer gender related questions as "sole representative" (F6, F1), handle care-related topics (F2, F3, M10, M3), taking notes (F7, Pilot 2) often because they were assumed to have different skills (F6, F7, F9, Pilot 2). Especially interesting in this context was the fact that it was mostly women recognizing these patterns and explaining that they have experienced a gender-based task distribution to their advantage or disadvantage. The male managers we interviewed sometimes recognized that women might be disadvantaged in task distribution, but no male interviewee had observed it within the case company themselves. Further, no man recognized an advantage or disadvantage in task distribution based on their gender.

"I was the only woman and the rest were four men [...] So they were looking at me for questions like how should we handle the situation if people are not feeling good? Then my informal role was to take these soft questions." - F2

"I used to look at my women employees [for planning activities] because they're more structured. [...]But that is also an unconscious bias, because I think, like the men in the team, they don't want to plan for birthday presents or the fika or an off-site for example." - F7

"It's a silly example, but when we were [...] on the off-site, the shitty technology in the conference center didn't work. [My female colleagues] were not naturally looking at me. [...] So nothing like that is going on." - M8

5.4. Management-Independent Allocation

5.4.1. Organizational Structures and Processes

In all 22 interviews the interviewees mentioned that they consider the areas of responsibility within the team and mainly assign tasks based on who is formally responsible for it. In this context, a common pattern was to assign supporting tasks like planning birthday parties to assistants with the reasoning that these tasks fall into their area of responsibility.

"If we have agreed in the team that maybe [male employee name] or [female employee name], they have the responsibility of financially related projects and there is a financially related project, then the first logical [step] is to see if they can take it." - M1

"Of course, assistants, they take a lot of what is non-promotable for others." - F1

In 13 cases, organizational legacy and habits influenced the task delegation. Then, it was not an active decision of the manager to choose an employee, but someone got the task because of the legacy the employee's position might entail, or the habit of them doing the respective task. In many cases, these tasks were not directly connected to the person's job but not yet handed over to the person officially responsible.

"In the early days of my team there were some legacy responsibilities that made some topics end up in the sister team due to [...] historical reasons [and the] shifting of people and so on." - M1

"It's usually distributed based on the organization set up. There's a very long [...] history of which department does what [...] in the workflow. So [...] it's not random, it's a long tradition." - M8

Slightly more than half of our interviewees (12) mentioned that they have systems in place to ensure even distribution between the team members. These systems allocate an even number of tasks automatically or ensure some sort of rotation, so the team members take turns.

"We have only one cost center [...] and there the tasks are distributed in the system. So, sometimes I get 10 invoices [to handle], then someone else gets 10." - F8

"If I'm away and someone needs to take the department meeting, then I ask, OK who didn't do it last time?" - M7

A total of 14 managers said it was a common process to ask for volunteers and thus not choose an employee themselves. This mechanism was especially customary when talking about tasks that do not fall into someone's direct area of responsibility.

"I typically wait for someone to pull up their hand to see if I get someone [to do the task]." - M3

5.4.2. Employee-Driven Allocation

In ten cases, our interviewees indicated that they volunteered for or initiated tasks to increase their own visibility and expand their skills, experiences or competencies to reach their own goals.

"I took on a lot of things that they didn't know how to do because they did not understand [the systems]. I was younger. I knew that I would get something back if I did that, [...] I knew that this would be good for myself if I wanted to learn more about being a [specific position]." - F3

During 15 interviews, our interviewees reported that either employees or they themselves volunteer because they felt responsible for company success or loyalty to the team and/or the firm.

"I didn't take on the project [...] because of my career. I did it because I wanted to support [the case company], and help them with it. [...] I wasn't set on promoting my own career." - F3

"If it's not clear who should do this, but we all sort of agree it has to be done, then someone takes that on voluntarily because it has to be done. So it's a [...] sense of responsibility for the totality rather than for only your role and responsibilities." - F6

On the other hand, eight managers indicated that they see women raise their hands more often than their male colleagues to volunteer for non-job-related tasks. Nevertheless, the only time someone mentioned that they felt a pressure themselves to raise their hand, it was a man (M7).

"This person is leaving the company and we need to buy a flower. Then it's a woman raising her hand." - F7

*"But usually it's my manager asking, who should do this then and then followed by a silence for 25 seconds, which becomes more and more stiffer [...]. In the end I'm like, ah, **** it, I'll do it [...] because I felt them stare at me."* - M7

A recurring theme in 16 interviews was the fact that how interviewees perceive themselves influences what they think is their task. Sometimes they referred to their role as managers and how they think a manager should behave, while at other times it was more about their general personality. The self-perceptions differed widely, which had far-reaching consequences for which tasks they decided to engage in. A full list of self-descriptions can be found in Appendix VI.

"I think if you come from a different background [...] you much more easily limit yourselves to what role you should have. And then you also might [feel] like I should take those tasks. That's normal. I will just help out. That's my role." - F9

"I've never been that sort of person. In work, in private life. I never planned a party for myself. I always have other people plan, I join." - M10

"Being a friend of good order, [...] I spend many [...] hours on structuring things, documenting things for the future. It's good for my job [even though it's nothing that someone else sees or receives]." - M5

Finally, three of the interviewed managers said the way they want to be perceived and the reputation they want to build made them select different tasks to do themselves in terms of volunteering or initiating.

"*I've created the feeling of everybody being a part of something [by engaging in specific tasks]. That is [...] spread through the organization that this is a good place to work in. So [you could] create this reputation of being a good manager, leader, co-worker."* - F3

6. Discussion

With the following section, we aim to relate our empirical findings to the existing literature outlined above. Presenting our findings structured along our research questions, we start this part by discussing 'How do managers reason about who to choose when delegating tasks?' (6.1.), and then we move on to discussing 'Which other factors play a role in task distribution?' (6.2.).

6.1. How Do Managers Reason about Who to Choose When Delegating Tasks?

To drive company success, managers should aim to delegate tasks that they themselves receive or identify by combining their employees' individual qualities in the most productive way, thereby making the most productive use of the employees' time (Boxall, 1996; Lockett et al., 2009). To reach this, RBV provides assessment criteria, which we found to align with the reasoning of almost all our interviewees. Most considered the employee's competencies and past experiences, i.e. the employee's functionality when deciding who is suitable for the task. Almost as often, they were considerate of their employees' workload and partially regarded situations outside of work. Thereby, the managers assessed the employee's capacity and ensured that tasks are only assigned to employees who have enough time to take them on. A minority of interviewees also indicated that they take the profitability of employment into consideration. While some managers explicitly stated that they choose the person based on their hourly rate, more managers mentioned a trade-off where they have to choose what to

spend their time on most efficiently (Bailly & Dubrion, 2025; Jha, 2004; Lockett et al., 2009; Penrose, 2009).

Regarding the development opportunities a manager should provide (Bailly & Dubrion, 2025; Boxall, 1996; Lockett et al., 2009), our interviewees seemingly help their employees acquire new skills in two ways. The vast majority said they assign tasks based on the individual development needs of the employee. However, more than half also stated that they focus on what their team needs to succeed in moving forward. Ideally, this procedure ensures that everyone in the team is able to cover for each other and dependencies on particular individuals are minimized. Thus, in line with theory, the managers seemed to consider their employees potential and allocate tasks as learning opportunities to foster new abilities and knowledge (Bailly & Dubrion, 2025; Boxall, 1996; Lockett et al., 2009). None of them explicitly stated that they reassess their task assignments after their employees developed new abilities, which Lockett et al. (2009) suggested. However, as mentioned before, they consider the past experiences of an employee too, which we understand as to include past learning opportunities.

While these objective employee qualities should drive task allocation, previous researchers found evidence for the impact of the manager's subjective perceptions on how they view the task at hand, and thus the required competencies, as well as how they perceive the employee's abilities (Lockett et al., 2009; Penrose, 2009). Starting with the managers' subjective classification of the task, they might allocate resources differently depending on how they subjectively perceive the circumstances within and outside of the firm (Penrose, 2009). Looking at our interviews, several managers mentioned that their understanding of the task influenced who they perceive as most suitable. Mostly, the interviewees mentioned time pressure, the required skills and abilities, and whether they personally perceived a task as interesting or not. These subjective categorizations then seemingly influenced the subsequent matching of the task with a suitable employee, which is in line with the argumentation of Babcock et al. (2017) where some task categories are associated with a specific employee-group. This is especially interesting since Ayyappan et al. (2025) pointed out that time pressure and uncertainty can lead people to skip logical reasoning, by engaging in quick decision-making which is often biased by stereotypes. In line with this rationale, we found that time pressure often leads to managers choosing a senior person or someone who they assume will deliver well and quickly instead of using assignments as development opportunities. Uncertainty, in our case, seemed to be connected to tasks that anyone could do, so it was not

clear who should take them. Our interviewees did not seem to spend a lot of time on logical reasoning about who would be the best fit, but were rather guided by their gut feeling, which aligns with the findings of Ayyappan et al. (2025).

Moving on to the manager's subjective perception of the employee's abilities, almost all of our interviewees mentioned that they consider past experiences with an employee and expect past performance to continue in the future. Thus, someone who has delivered well in the past might be chosen for this again and thereby, the manager potentially overlooks someone better suited for the task. This is in line with Babcock et al.'s (2017) observation that good performance in the past makes it seemingly more efficient to allocate similar tasks to the same employee again, which could reinforce unequal patterns of task distribution. Interestingly, we also found that many managers take the personal preferences of the employees into consideration when assigning tasks. Some of them argued that if an employee is passionate about something, they will probably be good at it too. While we cannot assume that this was the reasoning for everyone, it seems like the managers' subjective assessment of objective employee qualities is influenced by their knowledge about the respective employee in terms of known passions or preferences. Finally, if the manager recognizes similarities or has a good relationship with an employee, it seems to make them assign more tasks to that employee. Many managers argue that it is either easier to collaborate with or to ask these employees to take on PTs and NPTs, again showing a subjective perception of the employee's abilities in line with RBV (Lockett et al., 2009).

In our interviews, this subjective perception seemed to be informed, and thereby partially biased, by active information gathering, the manager's good intentions, and role-based expectations. First of all, while only half of our interviewees relied on the employees to proactively inform them about their personal situation, interests and needs, a small majority has systems in place to understand their employees' feelings and needs. This was especially interesting to us, since we wondered how the managers who mentioned neither of these assess the employee's capacity and personal interests. It seems to us like the managers who rely on their employees to proactively communicate their situation, and especially those who do not engage in information gathering, might miss out on information to correctly assess who is the most suitable for the task at hand. Thus, what we call information gathering seemingly has a direct impact on the manager's perception of the employee's qualities, which might cause an incorrect allocation of tasks (Lockett et al., 2009; Penrose, 2009).

As mentioned by Babcock et al. (2022), good intentions can impact who gets which tasks. This statement was supported by our findings, where most managers indicated that their perception of fairness guides their task allocation. However, our interviewees differed in their perception of a fair distribution and consequently, they relied on different selection criteria with far reaching consequences for their task delegation. While some saw an even workload among the team members as fair, others focused more on providing everyone with an equal amount of learning opportunities. Moreover, two female managers purposefully assigned tasks to female employees to provide visibility to the women in their department. While Babcock et al. (2022) mainly saw a pattern of women receiving more NPTs, in this context we found women to receive more PTs because of their gender too. Nevertheless, we cannot reject the hypothesis that women also receive more NPTs and will come back to this point in the last paragraph of this section, before moving on to our next research question.

As mentioned by Anglin et al. (2022), how a manager perceives an employee's abilities can be biased by stereotypes connected to the role the individual holds. While most existing literature on role-based expectations focuses on gender and functional roles, in the majority of our interviews the managers expressed that they expected senior employees to have more experiences and better skills. Thus, they connected the status role as senior employee with a higher skill-level, which caused managers to assign tasks that they perceived as more important to these employees. In this context, it is important to mention that the managers did not necessarily observe better skills and based their selection on past experiences with the employee, but chose the employee often solely based on their role and connected expectations (Anglin, 2022; Eagly & Karau, 2002).

Finally, and especially interesting in the context of our critical case company, was the fact that the majority of our interviewees reported that women were expected to take on more or different tasks because of their gender, in line with previous research on how negative stereotypes impact task delegation for women (Babcock et al., 2017; Babcock et al., 2022; Bechthold, 2015; Bertrand, 2018; Bircan et al., 2024; Huff, 1990). Our female interviewees reported that they either receive more tasks that we would categorize as NPTs themselves, or that they still observe women to be selected for these tasks more often. Men, however, did not report ever having been advantaged or disadvantaged in the distribution of tasks because of their gender, even if they admitted that it could be different for women. This situation could be

due to the fact that the male gender role is in line with their career roles, and that even in our case company, certain tasks are still associated with stereotypical gender role expectations (Anglin et al., 2022; Babcock et al., 2017).

6.2. Which Other Factors Play a Role in Task Distribution?

During the course of our analysis, we identified several examples of allocation that were independent of managerial decisions. In these situations, the manager did not choose an individual employee but instead relied on existing organizational structures or processes that removed their responsibility to delegate. Alternatively, managers relied on an employee-driven task allocation by asking for volunteers or employees-initiated tasks themselves.

Starting with the managers relying on existing organizational structures or practices, in line with RT, all managers referred to official responsibilities being part of the allocation of tasks. Here, the job role or title, and thus the functional role with connected expectations, become the deciding factors for who does what and the manager seemingly narrowed down the choice of candidates, e.g., assigning NPTs to assistants, because as task is part of their job description (Livingston, 2014; Eagly et al., 2019). This was only sometimes followed by other considerations about the individual.

In a similar manner, we found that legacies and habits within the organization ascribe certain tasks to individuals despite the task not necessarily fitting into the role or skills of the employee. Again, there is a lack of active delegation and consideration from a manager, as tasks are automatically handed to someone based on the position they hold or because others are used to that employee performing that assignment. Since expectations and stereotypes are formed through observed behavior of people within a given role, once a task has been performed by the employee who held this or a similar position, it could be expected that the successor would continue performing similar tasks (Eagly et al., 2019). Thereby, organizational processes and structures can influence and reinforce unfair distributions, independent of gender roles as indicated by previous literature (Conzon, 2023; Lester, 2008; Llorens et al., 2021).

As mentioned before, more than half of our interviewees had systems in place to ensure even distribution of less interesting or challenging tasks, so that everyone had to engage in them equally. Since it was expected that everyone possessed the necessary skills to complete these tasks, and because they systematically needed to be done, there was no need for the manager

to actively choose the most suitable candidate. While such a distribution does not consider the suitability of the employee, it ensures that all team members share the tasks in the system equally. While we do not know the exact motives of our interviewees, this finding is potentially in line with RBV as it aims to contribute to a more balanced workload among the employees, but it could also be related to the good intentions of managers driving the use of a system (Babcock et al., 2022; Lockett et al., 2009).

As indicated in our interviews, it is also common practice to leave the allocation up to the employees by opening up for volunteers. Especially when the task did not fall into a clear area of responsibility, managers often choose to let people volunteer, without selecting a suitable employee themselves. Babcock et al. (2017) showed that asking for volunteers is a central mechanism in the unequal allocations of NPTs, as women face stereotypical expectations to sacrifice their time for the team and consequently, in line with our findings, volunteer more often.

This brings us to the employee-driven task allocation. While we have no way of substantiating whether or not women accept more of these tasks in concrete numbers, several of our interviewees identified patterns of women being more prone to put their hands up and volunteer for tasks. While this is an external observation by the managers of others, this behavior could be due to internalized stereotype-based expectations, which create the social pressure on women to accept (non-promotable) tasks and "take one for the team" (Babcock et al., 2022, p.65). Therefore, our findings further substantiate that volunteering practices might contribute to a gender-unequal distribution of tasks (Babcock et al., 2017). Observing women raising their hands more often, especially in the context of NPTs, can shape and reinforce gender-based expectations (Eagly et al., 2019). As mentioned above, this phenomenon can lead to managers unconsciously associating women with these kinds of tasks (Babcock et al., 2017; Lester, 2008; Llorens et al., 2021). Nevertheless, it is important to mention that the only interviewee who explicitly mentioned a personal pressure to volunteer for a task was a man (M7), and we cannot ascertain where this perceived pressure stems from. Moreover, these observation-based expectations, which might influence the managers' subjective assessment process, can also be true for the other behaviors mentioned here, potentially leading to associating women or other employee groups with certain task categories.

Connected to volunteering, we found varying motives of employees to initiate and take on tasks. Some interviewees reported engaging in tasks to reach their goals and gain visibility. We saw no clear gender differences or segregation in the engagement in such behavior. This is interesting since it seems to contradict the internalized gendered expectations on women to be rather supportive and communal (Eagly & Karau, 2002). As evidenced by F3, for instance, volunteering helped her develop vital skills and gave her the visibility needed to advance within the organization. Meanwhile, she did not seem to face retaliation because of this role incongruent behavior as existing research would suggest, but was rather rewarded (Babcock et al., 2022; Eagly & Karau, 2002).

At other times, our interviewees observed employees taking on tasks out of a sense of loyalty, either to the team or to the company, taking on a variety of tasks which were more or less promotable. Again, existing literature suggests that women would sacrifice more of their time on communal behavior (Babcock et al., 2017; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Eagly et al., 2022). Nevertheless, we found that men and women equally engaged in this behavior and felt responsible for the company's success. While it is difficult to determine the actual spread of volunteering behaviors and the motivations behind them, the interviews appear to indicate that gendered expectations, as indicated by Babcock et al. (2017), is not the only determinant for employees seeking out or accepting opportunities to volunteer, and that other motivations like loyalty and career advancement take precedence in our critical case company.

Another motivation of employee-driven task allocation derived from our interviews was that the self-perception of the interviewee, rather than their objective qualities, often influenced what tasks our interviewees decided to take on voluntarily or to reject. Both women and men equally expressed a desire to behave in line with their self-perceptions but, interestingly, these self-perceptions varied between the interviewees (Appendix VI). These different self-descriptions could potentially lead individuals to connect different expectations to their role and consequently to them behaving differently in efforts to avoid social penalties for role incongruent behavior (Eagly & Karau, 2002). However, the interviewees never mentioned any social penalties or fear of retaliation related to their choice of tasks. Instead, the focus either laid on their desire to stay true to their understanding of what the manager’s role is or their personality determined what they saw as their job. Thus, it appears as if the driver of behavior in this context is not primarily the social norms and external role expectations, but rather the individuals' understanding of their own role.

While not part of our theoretical framework, which takes the manager's perspective in line with our methodological approach, we acknowledge that self-categorization theory might provide valuable insights into the described self-perception-driven behavior. In his historical review on social identity theory and self-categorization theory, Hornsey (2008) describes how individuals categorize themselves into groups, e.g., being a human instead of an animal, being part of a social group like students instead of teachers, or being a different person compared to one's direct peers. Consequently, they perceive different "attitudes, emotions and behaviors [as] appropriate in a given context" (Hornsey, 2008, p. 209). Contrasting it against RT, the focus of self-categorization theory is not the social system that determines roles and expectations, but rather the individuals who categorize the groups they see fit with (like M10 who does not see personal fit with being a party planner) and have access to (like F9 who did not expect to enter top-management) (Hornsey, 2008). While we can neither confirm nor refute if role congruency plays a role in the self-selection of tasks, the self-perception, and consequently the self-categorization of an employee seems to influence which tasks they choose to take on themselves or to reject.

As a final area of analysis, and going further beyond our theoretical framework, we recognize that choosing a task based on the reputation you aim to build and the way you want to be perceived could potentially be explained by the research field of impression management. Here, individuals agentically manage their personal characteristics and behavior around others to create a specific impression, but do not necessarily have to conform to role-based expectations or act in the best interest of organizations (Goffman, 1959; Guadagno & Cialdini, 2007; Jones, 1990; Rosenfeld et al., 2005; Schlenker, 1980). These two attributes clearly differentiate impression management from RT and organizational citizenship behavior as defined above. While we cannot gain full insights into the exact motivations of our interviewees, we recognize the existing theory that helps us explain the other factors that play a role in task distribution.

7. Conclusions

The purpose of our study was to explore how managers reason about who to choose when delegating tasks and which other factors play a role in task distribution within a multinational industrial company in Sweden. By interviewing managers about their experiences and applying

RT and RBV, we close our identified research gaps and provide answers to our two research questions. In this section, we answer our research questions (7.1. & 7.2.), followed by our Developed Theoretical Framework (7.3.), Theoretical Contributions (7.4.), Practical Contributions (7.5.), Limitations (7.6.), and conclude with our outline for Future Research (7.7.).

RQ 1: How do managers reason about who to choose when delegating tasks?

RQ2: Which other factors play a role in task distribution?

7.1. How Managers Reason about Who to Choose when Delegating Tasks

When a task occurs, meaning the manager receives a task from someone else, or identifies it themselves, a subjective managerial assessment process starts. Here, the manager classifies the task and derives the required employee qualities to determine a suitable candidate to delegate it to. Typically, managers distribute tasks based on their perception of objective employee characteristics like the employee's functionality, the employee's capacity, the profitability of employment, and potential capability development opportunities. The perception of these characteristics, however, is influenced by informing factors which potentially skew the managers' view of both the task and the employee. These informing factors include mechanisms of information gathering about the employee's objective qualities, the manager's good intentions, and role-based expectations and stereotypes which potentially bias the subjective managerial assessment process. Such considerations can play a big part in whom the manager determines to be the most suitable candidate, possibly forgoing objective criteria in the process.

We found some role-based expectations to be tied to functional, status, and gender roles. Having investigated our critical case company with active initiatives towards gender equality in a relatively gender-equal society, we assume that this pattern might reoccur in most, if not all, other cases. Moreover, the interviews revealed subjective factors like similarity with the employee, their knowledge of employee's passions and preferences, and past experiences with them to be a determinant of managerial task delegation. The influence of these factors can be increased by perceived time pressure and uncertainty, which can make the manager skip time-consuming logical reasoning and thus rely more on stereotypes and biased expectations in their delegation decision.

Thus, we conclude that within a multinational industrial company in Sweden, managers reason through their delegation choice based on their subjective assessment of both the task's requirements and the objective employee qualities. This is influenced by several informing factors which become more or less prevalent depending on subjectively perceived time pressure and uncertainty. This creates an interaction between the informing factors and the manager's task classification when selecting the most suitable employee for the task.

7.2. Other Factors that Play a Role in Task Distribution

Through the empirical analysis, we found that not all tasks are actively delegated by managers, which we call management-independent allocation. Here, managers either rely on organizational structures and processes to assign tasks without their active selection of an employee, or employee-driven task allocation occurs through volunteering for, or the initiation of, tasks. By evenly assigning tasks across team members, a systems-based approach to delegation ensures that no one group routinely performs a specific set of tasks, e.g., NPTs, and could therefore be an important mechanism in preventing role-based expectations to drive task allocation. Official responsibilities limit the amount of considered candidates for a task to those who should most likely have the required qualities. This, however, can potentially exclude other candidates, who could objectively be a better fit. Consequently, relying on established organizational structures and processes, e.g. organizational habits and legacy or asking for volunteers, can influence and reinforce unfair task distribution.

While we found that this can affect all employees, many interviewees specifically observed women raising their hands more often, even within our selected critical case company. Based on this finding, we assume that gender plays an equal or even more important role in less gender-equal companies and societies. Even more important, however, is seemingly the employee's self-perception or the reputation they want to build, which led our interviewees to initiate or volunteer for diverse tasks seemingly independent of their gender. Nevertheless, managers might observe employees' (self-driven) behavior and consequently, change their subjective assessment of the respective employee. This can, again, create and reinforce systematic task segregation as different categories of tasks might be connected to specific employee groups.

Thus, we conclude that not just delegation influences the distribution of tasks within a multinational industrial company in Sweden. Managers seem to at least partially rely on organizational structures and processes, and parallelly, employees volunteer for or initiate tasks themselves with the possibility or risk to impact the manager's subjective perception of their qualities.

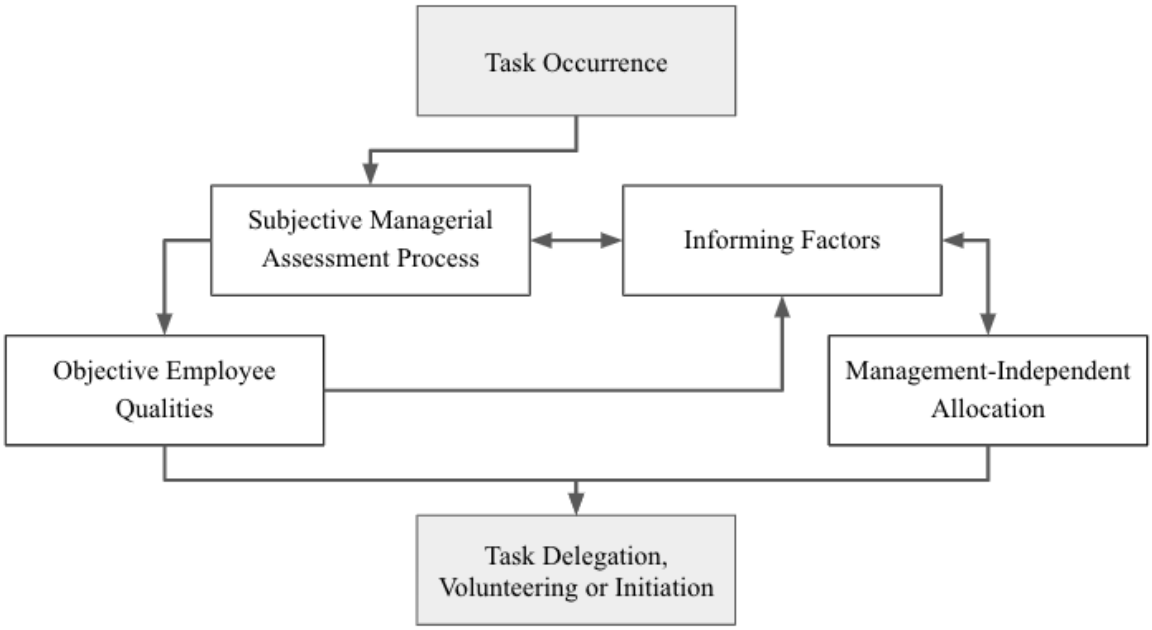
7.3. Developed Theoretical Framework

Integrating the findings of our study into our initial theoretical framework outlined in Section 3.3., we developed the following integrated framework of task distribution (Figure 3). It visualizes the dynamic interplay of the identified factors influencing the distribution of tasks in organizations from a manager's perspective.

To summarize the discussion above, when a task occurs, meaning the manager receives a task from someone or identifies it themselves, a subjective managerial assessment process starts, where the manager chooses who they see as the most suitable employee for the task. The process is, however, influenced by several informing factors, enabling a more or less accurate assessment of objective employee qualities. Depending on the manager's task classification, different informing factors that end up being more or less influential on the manager's subjective assessment are triggered. Finally, we found that all our interviewees also partially rely on management-independent allocation, where tasks are either automatically delegated, employees volunteer for them, or they initiate tasks themselves. This in turn affects the informing factors, and consequently the subjective managerial assessment process in task delegation.

Figure 3

Developed Theoretical Framework



7.4. Theoretical Contributions

While the literature on task distribution and segregation is evolving, we identified a clear gap of an integrated framework combining existing research to understand how managers reason about who to choose when delegating tasks, and which other factors play a role in task distribution. With our developed theoretical framework, we closed the identified research gap, extended the understanding of how gender influences task distribution, even in relatively gender-equal contexts and identified new motives for why someone agrees to take on NPTs. While Babcock et al. (2017) mainly focus on the volunteering gap between men and women, we identified that employees also initiate different tasks themselves, depending on what we identified as their self-perception or the reputation and perception they want to build. Thereby, we create a more nuanced understanding of what drives volunteering behavior. Finally, existing work on RBV has clearly identified the manager's subjective perception of the employee and the company's internal and external circumstances to potentially bias their decision making. We contribute by identifying managers' individual perception of fairness as additionally influencing the general workload they expect employees to handle, meaning their assessment criteria, instead of only influencing their perception of employee qualities against set criteria.

7.5. Practical Contributions

Our study provides several practical implications for managers and organizations by shedding light on the factors considered by managers when delegating tasks and other factors impacting the distribution of tasks. Even in the context of our critical case company, gender, along with other roles, seems to bias delegation, which comes with negative consequences for both the individual and the firm. Given that especially time pressure and uncertainty can make managers rely more on stereotypes and biased expectations, we advise managers to be conscious about their biases and actively reflect upon their delegation process. To arrive at an accurate assessment of an employee's qualities, we encourage companies to establish systems through which managers learn more about their employees' needs, personal situation, interests, and capabilities. Moreover, companies should establish development programs on the process and consequences of task distribution for managers. Additionally, employees should be informed about how their choice of tasks reflects back on them to enable informed decision-making and equal opportunities for everyone. Combined, the practical implications can unlock even task distribution with benefits for the individual and company as elaborated on above.

7.6. Limitations

While we provide valuable contributions to theory and praxis, we acknowledge the limitations of our study. Starting with the natural limitation of having signed NDAs and being mindful of data privacy breaches, we were not able to disclose everything about the case company. Connected to this, we can only claim facts about the company, as confidentiality makes it impossible to provide suitable references that would enable the reader to verify the information. Regarding our sampling, by looking into one company only, our data lacks insights on the influence of organizational cultures on task distribution. Further, we relied on the subjective experiences of our interviewees regarding how they distribute tasks. Thereby, our study takes a managerial perspective and might not be able to reveal all biases or decisions-factors (Wang & Jeon, 2020). We did not confirm these experiences by talking to employees, nor to related management-team members, who could potentially provide us with a more nuanced perspective, similar to when our interviewees reflected on the behavior of their managers. Connected to this, we cannot exclude the possibility that our interviewees were less than honest, left out crucial details or overemphasized others due to a variety of reasons (Randall & Phoenix, 2009). This could, again, negatively impact the quality of our study.

Moving on to our questionnaire, we provided the interviewees with definitions of PTs and NPTs during the interview. We found that without them, the interviewees' answers to our questions were mainly related to what we perceive as PTs. During the early iterations of our interview guide, we included the definitions and consequently, received more nuanced answers in the following interviews. Nevertheless, we acknowledge that this approach might have influenced the interviewees in their answers, potentially imposing a way of reasoning on them, which they might not usually follow.

Finally, during our interviews, we also realized that some answers were contradictory, where interviewees first mentioned they follow one line of reasoning and later another. Similarly, from our data we cannot infer which factors a manager perceives as more or less important when reasoning who to delegate a task to but rather, we could identify the totality of factors they might consider. In these cases, we decided to take both answers into consideration and weigh them as equally true. However, without observing their behavior over a longer period of time, we cannot know which answer is closest to their actual behavior.

7.7. Future Research

Throughout our research process, we derived many avenues for future research. Firstly, since the framework was developed in the context of a multinational industrial company in Sweden and from a binary gender perspective, future research should test the applicability of this framework in different contexts and with a more diverse sample. Since Sweden is a country where the willingness to delegate is very high, we assume that conducting a similar study in a country like Portugal, Venezuela, or other countries with a low willingness to delegate could be highly interesting and insightful (Liberman & Boehe, 2011). Moreover, future research should shed light on the relative explanatory power of our identified factors influencing task distribution and potentially also suggest best practices that companies can implement to prevent task segregation and connected negative consequences. Additionally, as it became apparent from our interviews, AI tools have the potential to automate certain tasks, including NPTs. Therefore, it would also be interesting to see how AI tools influence delegation decision and task separation.

Connected to the identified employee-driven allocation of tasks, where we mentioned existing research in the field of self-categorization theory (Hornsey, 2008) and impression management (Goffman, 1959; Guadagno & Cialdini, 2007; Jones, 1990; Rosenfeld et al., 2005; Schlenker,

1980), we advise future research to further investigate the mechanisms driving employee-driven allocation. Thus, we assume conducting a study focusing on the delegatee, i.e., the employee, instead of the delegator, i.e., the manager, could provide valuable insights and further advance the framework. This could also challenge the potentially biased perspective of our manager-focused study. We would be especially interested in a sentiment analysis connected to the self-perception of employees, which we found to be relatively diverse.

Questioning the work of Babcock et al. (2017), we found that our interviewees did not resonate with the definition of PTs and NPTs. Some managers even indicated that the attitude with which an employee engages in tasks and their performance is more important in their promotions than which tasks they do. Organizational citizenship behavior, as defined by Podsakoff et al. (2009) could thus provide a different perspective on what is promotable and what not. They categorize tasks in regard to their promotability based on whether they help the individual (less promotable) or the organization (more promotable) instead of the visibility and learning opportunities an individual gains (Babcock et al., 2017; Podsakoff et al., 2009). Thus, we encourage future researchers to challenge the definition of what is (non-) promotable and to investigate the consequences different definitions might have on delegation decisions.

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9. Appendix

Appendix I. Overview of Interviews and Interviewees

Respondent	Department	Gender	Date of Interview	Duration of interview
Pilot 1	HR	female	25.02.2025	01:31:29
Pilot 2	HR	female	28.02.2025	01:18:00
F1	HR	female	21.03.2025	01:13:45
M1	Strategy	male	21.03.2025	00:58:55
M2	Logistics	male	20.03.2025	00:59:18
M3	Production	male	21.03.2025	01:35:28
M4	Finance	male	24.03.2025	00:59:42
M5	Controlling	male	24.03.2025	01:05:21
F2	Production	female	26.03.2025	01:11:34
M6	IT	male	27.03.2025	01:07:11
F3	Finance	female	27.03.2025	01:00:44
F4	Quality Assurance	female	01.04.2025	01:24:01
F5	Controlling	female	02.04.2025	00:56:41
F6	Production	female	03.04.2025	00:58:11
M7	Communications	male	03.04.2025	01:03:03
M8	HR	male	04.04.2025	00:51:21
M9	Strategy	male	04.04.2025	00:55:50
F7	Production	female	07.04.2025	00:57:10
M10	IT	male	09.04.2025	01:26:10
F8	Communications	female	10.04.2025	00:49:44
M11	IT	male	10.04.2025	00:49:10
F9	Business Development	female	11.04.2025	00:54:08

Appendix II. Email Asking for Interview-Partners

Dear [interview partner],

[Redacted for confidentiality] As I am currently in the last semester of my studies, I am writing my master's thesis together with my thesis partner Joel (in CC) on the distribution of tasks and the management of workload within [case company].

For our research, we are conducting several interviews with managers from different departments within [case company]. In our search for suitable interview partners, [your colleague] referred us to you. We would really appreciate talking to you and hearing about your perspective on our topic.

The interview would take approximately 1 hour, and we would like to conduct it before the end of March, so we have enough time to analyse your input. We are very flexible and would be happy to schedule a meeting at any time that works best for you. To make the recording of the data as efficient as possible, we would also suggest meeting online on Microsoft Teams.

All information will be anonymized, so that neither you, nor [case company], will be identifiable and the gathered data will be deleted right after our thesis is graded (latest end of June 2025). We have both signed an NDA for the thesis to ensure that you do not have to worry about sharing your experiences with us. No sensitive data or personal data will be published.

In case you want to participate, I've attached a consent and information sheet, which you can then read and "sign" if you consent with our data collection and processing. By "signing", I mean that you can just reply to this email saying "I read and consent with the Information and Consent Form that I was provided with."

Let me know if you have any questions or concerns - my thesis partner and I would be happy to answer them. You can reach me by answering this email, and my thesis partner with his address in CC (Joel Klefbom Ridderstråle: 50547@student.hhs.se).

We would really appreciate your help, and are looking forward to your response!

All the best,
Kira and Joel

Appendix III. Finalized Interview Guide

Introduction

- Brief introduction of ourselves and the purpose of this study.
- Asking if they have any questions before we start.
- Assuring that they can refuse to answer questions anytime.
- Asking for permission to record.

Openers

- Could you briefly tell us about yourself, your job role, and what you do in the company, ex:
    - How long have you been at the case company?
    - How long have you been at your department?
    - Why did you choose the case company?
- How do you spend your time at work?

From the perspective of a manager leading a team

Style and distribution

- How would you describe your management style? Why?
    - What do you like most and least about working as a manager?
- How do you typically distribute tasks in your team? Why?
    - How do you deal with someone who is overburdened?
    - How do you prioritize tasks?
- If you had to ask someone in your team to translate a document (plan a birthday party, participate in a committee), who would you turn to? Why?
- If you had to ask someone to lead a presentation, who would you turn to and why?

Introduction to Task Categorization of PTs and NPTs:

- *Promotable tasks*: are central to a person's job description and align with the **goals** and success of the company - essentially, they make the person **visible** and help them develop **skills** seen as important for their role and/or for **promotion**.
- *Non-promotable tasks*: are often important to the organization, but can be performed by anybody without requiring any specialized skill OR requires skills but do not translate into **visibility** or **opportunities** for the person who performs them.

- These all exist on a spectrum that differs depending on your job - so for an assistant, taking notes, booking meeting rooms, or doing admin might be promotable tasks. However, for an executive, translating documents, interviewing interns, or planning a birthday party is likely not promotable.
- With those definitions in mind, please reflect openly on the answers you gave before. How do you typically distribute promotable tasks, and how do you distribute non-promotable tasks?
- Which aspects do you consider when choosing a person?

Relational and members

- Please reflect openly: How does your knowledge of your team members and your relations with them influence your task distribution within the team?
- What do you think is difficult about distributing tasks?
- How would you define fair task distribution? Which aspects should be considered?

From the perspective of the manager as a team member of the management team

Distribution and perception

- Regarding shared non-department specific tasks (invoices, requests from outside), what are the mechanisms of distribution?
- Could you provide us with an example of a task that you saw as promotable but which was then given to someone else?
    - Why could you not do them/that?
- Could you provide us with an example of a non-promotable task that was given to you?
    - Why did you do them?

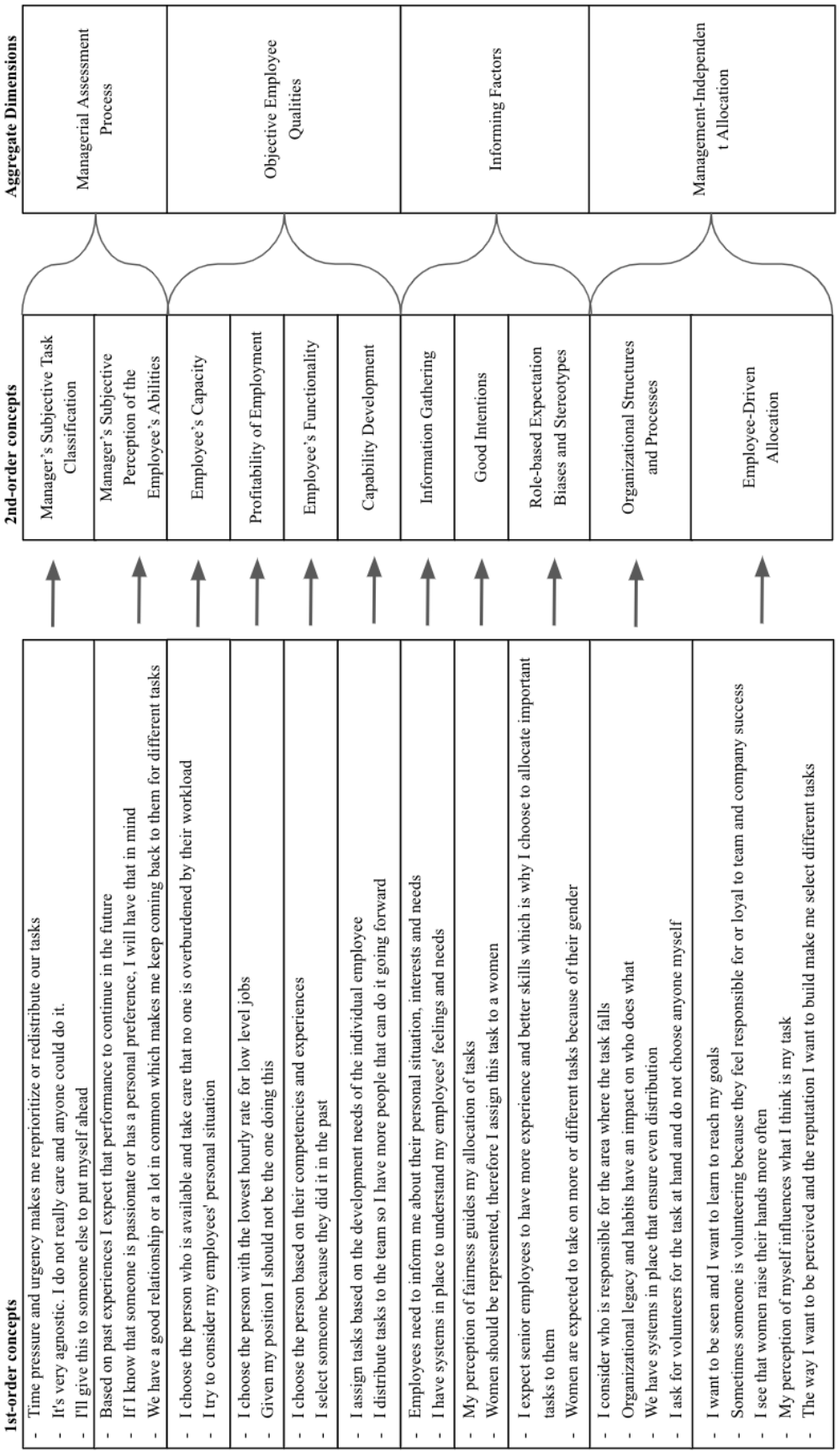
Relational and personal

- How do you perceive the social dynamics within the management team? Would you say everyone in the group has a similar relationship with the manager? Why (not)?
- Would you describe the workload distribution within the team as fair? Why (not)?
- What are the consequences when someone declines a task? Why?
- How are conflicts between team members usually resolved?
- How would you describe your informal role in the management team if you feel you have one? Why do you feel that way?
    - Do you hold a different role in the team you manage? Why?

Concluding Questions

- Which factors would you say influence the distribution of tasks in the case company? Why?
    - In your opinion, what would be the reason why some employees get assigned more non-promotable tasks and some get more promotable tasks?
    - Have you ever felt like a specific person or group was expected to take on more non-promotable tasks? Do you see any patterns of unequal distribution? Why do you think this is?
    - Have you ever felt like gender has affected the tasks that people are given/accept? Why do you think that would be?
- Is there anything we have not asked regarding your experience that you'd like to tell us?

Appendix IV. Coding Structure



Appendix V. Mapped 1st Order Concepts and Interviewees

1st order concepts	Interviewees																									
	F1	F2	F3	F4	F5	F6	F7	F8	F9	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	M6	M7	M8	M9	M10	M11	P1	P2				
Time pressure and urgency makes me reprioritize or redistribute our tasks	X	X		X	X	X	X	X		X				X	X		X	X		X						13
It's very agnostic. I do not really care and anyone could do it.	X			X				X	X	X		X			X		X	X	X							10
I'll give this to someone else to put myself ahead				X					X	X			X		X						X					6
Based on past experiences I expect that performance to continue in the future	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X				21
If I know that someone is passionate or has a personal preference, I will have that in mind	X		X	X	X		X	X	X	X		X				X	X	X	X	X		X				15
We have a good relationship or a lot in common which makes me keep coming back to them for different tasks						X	X									X		X			X	X				6
I choose the person who is available and take care that no one is overburdened by their workload	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X				X		X	X	X				18
I try to consider my employees' personal situation	X	X	X	X	X	X			X		X	X			X			X		X						12
I choose the person with the lowest hourly rate for low level jobs		X										X														2
Given my position I should not be the one doing this		X				X						X			X				X	X						6
I choose the person based on their competencies and experiences	X		X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X				20
I select someone because they did it in the past	X		X		X		X			X		X			X						X	X				9
I assign tasks based on the development needs of the individual employee	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X				18
I distribute tasks to the team so I have more people that can do it going forward		X	X		X	X	X	X		X	X	X		X		X	X	X	X	X						14
Employees need to inform me about their personal situation, interests and needs	X			X			X	X	X					X			X		X	X	X	X				11
I have systems in place to understand my employees' feelings and needs	X			X	X	X	X	X		X	X				X			X		X	X					12
My perception of fairness guides my allocation of tasks	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X			X	X	X	X						18
Women should be represented, therefore I assign this task to a women						X	X																			2
I expect senior employees to have more experience and better skills which is why I choose to allocate important tasks to them				X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X			X	X	X	X					15
Women are expected to take on more or different tasks because of their gender	X	X	X	X		X	X		X	X		X	X		X				X			X				13
I consider who is responsible for the area where the task falls	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X				22
Organizational legacy and habits have an impact on who does what	X			X				X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X		X		X					13
We have systems in place that ensure even distribution		X	X	X		X	X	X		X		X			X	X	X				X					12
I ask for volunteers for the task at hand and do not choose anyone myself	X	X	X	X			X		X		X	X		X	X	X	X		X	X						14
I want to be seen and I want to learn to reach my goals			X	X			X		X				X			X	X	X	X		X					10
Sometimes someone is volunteering because they feel responsible for or loyal to team and company success	X		X	X		X		X	X		X	X		X	X	X			X	X	X	X				15
I see that women raise their hands more often		X	X	X		X	X			X		X							X							8
My perception of myself influences what I think is my task		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X			X	X	X	X	X	X		X		X					16
The way I want to be perceived and the reputation I want to build make me select different tasks				X	X														X							3
	12	12	14	17	10	14	16	11	13	12	11	17	7	11	14	9	11	9	16	11	11	7				

Appendix VI. Overview of Self-perception Themes Listed by Gender

Women	Men	Both Genders
- "helpful" (F2) - "supportive of diversity" (F2) - "wanted to be seen as a good manager" (F3) - "inclusive" (F3, F4, F8) - "filtering for the team" (F3) - "caring" (F4) - "fair" (F4) - "flexible" (F4) - "challenging their employees" (F4) - "mediating" F6) - "ambitious" (F6) - "solution-oriented" (F8) - "the momma of the team" (Pilot 1) - "self-limiting" (F9)	- "not the party-planning kind of person" (M10) - "collaborative" (M3) - "manager's role is to handle-soft questions" (M3) - "the voice of reason" (M3) - "teacher" (M3, M10) - "guiding" (M4, M10) - "present" (M5) - "providing holistic view" (M5) - "the class clown" (M7) - "good samaritan" (M7) - "understanding employees" (M7, M8) - "servant" (M8)	- "structured" or "keeping the order" (F4, F7, M5, M7) - "supportive" (F3, M6) - "coaching"/"mentoring" (F4, F8, M8) - "facilitating" (F5, M6)

10. AI Appendix

10.1. AI Tool Description

We used two different AI tools during the writing of this thesis, namely ChatGPT-4o and Microsoft Teams AI transcription. The following section outlines the purpose, impact, identified risk, risk mitigation, and insights gained from the use of each tool.

ChatGPT-4o aided us in ideation (i.e., as a bouncing board), the vetting of sources, and reference formatting. The tool further helped improve the quality of the thesis by increasing the efficiency of a number of tasks. We prompted the AI model to check the relevancy of

potential sources against our own criteria, including our research proposal and foundational articles. This means that we either used it as a sparring partner to gain an initial overview of whole theories and/or key concepts, previous research and/or most relevant studies in the field. In some cases, it also helped us to dive deeply into the applicability of theories to our study by asking fine nuances between them, which we further investigated manually if of relevance. Furthermore, we automated parts of the referencing process according to the APA style when ready-made sources were not available, or the guidelines were unclear to us. However, we want to highlight that we did not use the tool to generate complete sentences or for data analysis purposes. Generative AI carries with it inherent risk, as it does not transparently display its decision-making process and thus might lead the user in the wrong direction or provide incorrect information. Therefore, we did not rely solely on the word of ChatGPT-4o and always verified the validity and usability of the sources or references ourselves to mitigate risks. In concrete terms, we did this by explicitly asking for the quote which the tool referred to and subsequently reading recommended articles which we perceived as relevant to our thesis ourselves. Additionally, we made sure that all links provided by the AI went to the correct address and that all dates and names were correct. Insights gained were mainly about the effectiveness of generative AI in task automation and the processing, analyzing as well as summarizing large amounts of text or critically challenging our way of thinking, which are some of ChatGPT's strong suits. However, we also quickly recognized some of the shortcomings inherent with large language models, as the tool can hallucinate or mix up sources and theories when given too much free rein.

We utilized Microsoft Teams AI transcription so that our interviews could be recorded and transcribed synchronously. This allowed us to focus on the actual conduct of the interview and selective notetaking for follow-ups and reduced our overall workload by not having to transcribe interviews manually. This enabled us to divert more time to other thesis-related tasks that we perceive as more value-adding than the pure transcription of interviews. We feel that these contributions enhanced the quality of our thesis and thus motivated the use of the transcription tool. We were wary, however, that automatic AI transcription is subject to errors which can lead to incorrect or false information being propagated, ultimately affecting our results. Names, numbers, and terms in languages other than English (to the extent that they occurred) or situations with a lot of background noise for instance appeared to be particularly difficult for the tool to transcribe. To mitigate this risk, we therefore used the recordings to cross reference the transcripts during the manual refinement of the transcripts, making sure to

mark and correct any mistakes we found. Thus, by using the tool we gained insight into the way AI can help automate and make data collection more effective, while also showing us the importance and value of cross-referencing notes manually for validity.

10.2. AI Sources

OpenAI. (2025). ChatGPT-4o (May 11th version) [Large Language Model]. https://chat.openai.com/chat

Microsoft Corporation. (2025). Microsoft Teams (AI transcription feature) [Software]. https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/microsoft-teams/group-chat-software