STOCKHOLM SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS

1351 Master's thesis in Business Management

Academic year 2024–2025

Building Futures on Temporary Grounds: Highly Skilled Migrants and Legal Dependency in Sweden

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Abstract

This thesis investigates how employer-tied work-permits shape the career trajectories, workplace experiences, and emotional well-being of highly skilled non-EU migrants (HSIs) in Sweden's information technology (IT) sector. Drawing on 20 in-depth interviews, the study reveals that legal status and organizational practices are not separate spheres of influence but deeply intertwined in the everyday lives of migrants. Sustainable retention of global talent in Sweden depends on more than legal reform or organizational intentions alone. This study suggests that frequent policy changes and a climate of legal uncertainty can undermine migrants' long-term commitment to staying in the country. At the same time, when employers fail to actively support and include migrant professionals, the effects of legal precarity are amplified. Lasting inclusion requires coordinated efforts – where responsive migration policy is matched by organizational responsibility. Theoretically, the thesis extends Psychological Contract Theory (PCT) by showing how institutional structures and organizational practices jointly shape how psychological contracts are formed, breached, and interpreted. Furthermore, Cognitive Dissonance Theory (CDT) is reconceptualized as a sustained emotional state under constraint, rather than a temporary internal conflict. By integrating the EVLN framework, the study shows how migrants' behavioral responses to unmet expectations are reshaped under structural constraint. What may appear as neglect – such as reduced ambition or delayed exit – is better understood as strategic adaptation to limited options shaped by legal and organizational dynamics. Even after securing permanent residency, the psychological imprint of early precarity persists, influencing how migrants relate to risk, ambition, and mobility.

Keywords: highly skilled immigrants, employer-tied work-permits, career stagnation, legal precarity, job lock

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Date examined: 27.05.2025

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Acknowledgment

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to all those who supported us throughout the process of completing this thesis. First and foremost, we are profoundly grateful to the individuals who participated in our interviews. Your openness in sharing deeply personal experiences and your reflections formed the core of this research. The honesty and courage with which you recounted moments of uncertainty, hope, and challenges were both humbling and inspiring. This thesis is built upon your voices, and we hope it does justice to the trust you placed in us.

We would like to express our sincere thanks to our supervisor, Sarah Philipson Isaac, for her insightful guidance, constructive feedback, and encouragement from the early stages of research to the final draft. Her support has been invaluable in shaping both the direction and depth of this work.

Lastly, we thank our families and friends for their unwavering support, patience, and belief in us throughout this journey. To those who generously took the time to read and comment on our thesis drafts – your encouragement, thoughtfulness, and care have been a steady source of strength and motivation.

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List of Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Definition
HSI	Highly Skilled Immigrants
IT	Information Technology
EU	The European Union
PCT	Psychological Contract Theory
PC	Psychological Contract
CDT	Cognitive Dissonance Theory
CD	Cognitive Dissonance

1. Introduction

> I realize that I had dreams in Türkiye, but now there are a lot of dependencies, like the work-permit, job security, and everything that comes with it. Maybe when I get a permanent work-permit or citizenship, I'll be able to start dreaming again. But right now, I feel like I've lost my ability to dream (Interviewee 2).

Migration is often driven by dreams, ambition, and the hope for a better future – but it is also shaped by structural inequalities, political instability, limited local opportunities, and global disparities in access to resources in migrants' countries of origin (Czaika & Reinprecht, 2022). Whether motivated by opportunity or necessity, migration is rarely a fully voluntary act; rather, it is navigated through constrained agency and shaped by systemic forces (Carling & Talleraas, 2016; Van Hear et al., 2018), a reality that is especially pronounced for non-EU labor migrants, whose right to reside in Sweden depends solely on employer sponsorship and shifting migration policies.

Among those, highly skilled immigrants (HSIs) form a distinct group: individuals with advanced education, expertise, or international experience, often recruited to fill labor shortages in knowledge-intensive sectors (Iredale, 2001; Chiswick, 2005; Osanami Törngren & Holbrow, 2016). This paper focuses on non-EU HSIs in Sweden's information technology (IT) sector, particularly those who design, develop, manage, and implement digital systems and infrastructure. These professionals are central to Sweden's innovation economy; yet their migration experiences are far more complex than the *global talent* narrative suggests, which often portrays them as highly mobile and professionally empowered (Sandoz & Hercog, 2018; Ullah et al., 2021). For non-EU HSIs, crossing borders does not simply open doors – it often brings them into contact with complex legal and bureaucratic systems that simultaneously enable and constrain their aspirations (Axelsson, 2017; Krifors, 2017).

Interviewee 2's reflection encapsulates the emotional and existential burden of these systems. Living in Sweden on an employer-sponsored work-permit, they describe feeling "suspended between two worlds" – unable to fully envision a future due to their uncertain legal status. Their

account reveals how what is often seen as a neutral, technical process of migration management becomes, for HSIs, a source of chronic emotional strain, self-censorship, and stalled aspirations.

This individual experience reflects broader patterns. Recent research has begun to question how Nordic welfare states – long celebrated for their universalism – are increasingly producing legal and social exclusions through differentiated access to rights for migrants (Barker, 2017; Könönen, 2017; Näre & Maury 2024). In Sweden, these dynamics have become more pronounced amid shifts in its labor migration regime. Once regarded as a liberal leader within the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2011), Sweden has undergone a significant transformation in its migration governance, affecting multiple migration categories. This paper focuses specifically on labor migration, where recent reforms have introduced more restrictive conditions for HSIs. The Tidö Agreement, a collaboration between Sweden's right-wing government and the right-wing populist Sweden Democrats, has laid the foundation for a series of increasingly restrictive migration policies. These include raising wage thresholds for work-permits, imposing tougher criteria for permanent residency and family reunification, and proposing an extension of the citizenship qualification period from five to eight years, alongside mandatory language and civic knowledge requirements and other exclusionary measures (SOU 2025:1). At the same time, Sweden actively promotes fast-track pathways for attracting HSIs – particularly in tech fields – positioning itself as a competitive knowledge-driven society (Swedish Migration Agency, 2024).

This duality produces what Frödin and Kjellberg (2018, p. 65) describe as *paradoxical labor immigration reform*: while the country is formally open to labor migrants, the system ultimately offers only conditional security. Yet the very systems designed to attract HSIs may inadvertently contribute to their disillusionment and attrition.

These contradictions have implications beyond fairness or well-being. As global competition for talent intensifies, countries around the world increasingly treat HSI attraction and retention as a central strategy for economic growth and technological leadership (Irastorza & Bevelander, 2021; Handel, 2024). In this context, retention – understood as the capacity to not only attract HSIs but also to ensure their long-term professional engagement, security, and integration –

becomes critical. Sweden exemplifies this challenge particularly starkly: between 2024 and 2028, the country is projected to face an annual shortfall of 18,000 tech professionals (TechSverige, 2024), underscoring the urgent need not merely to recruit, but to meaningfully retain skilled migrants.

Against this backdrop, this paper takes Sweden's IT sector – a critical arena for addressing skilled labor shortages – to examine how legal precarity and employer-tied permits shape the professional experiences of non-EU HSIs. By focusing on a sector where English is the primary working language, this analysis reduces the influence of language-related barriers, allowing structural constraints to emerge more clearly. This approach is supported by Aldén and Hammarstedt (2014), finding that foreign-born Europeans, despite often lacking native-level Swedish fluency, fare significantly better in the labor market than many non-European groups, even when accounting for educational attainment. Their study points to labor market barriers such as limited access to networks and discrimination, suggesting that outcomes are shaped by more than individual characteristics like language skills. Building on this broader understanding of structural disadvantage, this study shifts the focus toward how migration governance frameworks – particularly legal precarity and employer dependency – shape the lived professional experiences of non-EU HSIs in Sweden.

1.1 Problematization

Existing research on labor migration in Sweden has examined inequalities in recruitment (Bursell, 2007; Carlsson, 2010; Aldén & Hammarstedt, 2014; Risberg & Romani, 2021), processes of deskilling and overqualification affecting highly educated migrants (Landolt & Thieme, 2018; Andersson Joona et al., 2014), and racialized workplace dynamics (Romani et al., 2018; Rosander & Blomberg, 2021). While Frödin and Kjellberg (2018) critically examine how employer-driven recruitment structures produce legal precarity, their analysis focuses on low-skilled migrants. Overall, much of this literature remains primarily descriptive or outcome-focused, highlighting patterns of disadvantage without fully engaging with the legal frameworks – such as employer-tied work-permits – that structure migrants' long-term mobility and career prospects.

However, a growing body of literature also explores the structural challenges facing labor migrants in Sweden. Axelsson (2017) shows that employer-tied, time-limited permits create *temporally thick borders* that restrict cross-border mobility and delay settlement and long-term planning of HSIs. While she captures how HSIs experience these constraints – particularly in relation to waiting, insecurity, and liminality – her analysis remains focused on the role of state institutions. What remains less explored is how these temporal constraints reverberate within organizational contexts and shape workplace dynamics and psychological contracts (PCs) for HSIs**.** Krifors (2017) examines how managers in the IT industry frame migrant workers as culturally different and temporary, however she does not engage with the legal structure of employer-tied work-permits or how these shape HSIs' actual opportunities, constraints, and long-term career mobility. Irastorza and Bevelander (2021) reveal income gaps and underemployment among highly educated migrants, challenging the idea of seamless integration of HSIs. Similarly, Woolfson et al. (2013) point to growing precarity across Sweden's labor market without differentiating highly skilled from lower-skilled workers. Taken together, these studies demonstrate how migration law structures precarity and how workplace practices reproduce it, yet rarely examines how the two interact – an oversight that has grown especially salient in an uncertain political climate, where shifting migration policies can abruptly deepen employer dependency and render HSIs' legal trajectories far less predictable.

1.2 Aim, Research Question, and Contribution

This thesis aims to analyze how Sweden's employer-tied work-permit regime shapes the workplace experiences and career trajectories of highly skilled non-EU IT professionals. It investigates how their initial expectations collide with employer dependency, legal uncertainty, and opaque bureaucracy, and how organizational practices can buffer – or amplify – these constraints. By linking migration policy to day-to-day dynamics within the IT field, the study further examines how legal status affects HSIs' ability to negotiate roles, exercise agency, and sustain professional commitment over time. Centering these professionals' perspectives, the thesis seeks to reveal how policy and organizational contexts jointly shape perceptions of fairness, mobility, and professional identity. Specifically, it examines the following overarching research question:

How do work-permit regulations influence the career progression and workplace experiences of highly skilled migrant IT professionals in Sweden?

To address this, the study delves into several sub-questions:

1. How do migrants' pre-migration expectations compare with their lived experiences under Sweden's employer-tied work-permit system?
2. How do work-permit regulations affect migrants' career decisions and professional mobility?
3. How do workplace practices influence migrants' experiences of legal precarity?

1.2.1 Contribution

This thesis contributes to scholarship on highly skilled migration in several important ways. Empirically, it addresses an underexplored area in the Swedish context by examining how post-entry legal precarity – particularly employer-tied work-permits – shapes the professional agency and emotional responses of non-EU IT professionals. In doing so, it expands on the work of Axelsson (2017), Krifors (2017), and Irastorza and Bevelander (2021), with an additional focus on the workplace-level implications of current policy regimes.

Theoretically, this thesis contributes to existing literature by applying and extending Psychological Contract Theory (PCT) (Rousseau, 1989, 1995) and Cognitive Dissonance Theory (CDT) (Festinger, 1957) to the underexplored context of HSIs navigating Sweden's labor migration regime. It extends PCT by highlighting how structural conditions – such as immigration policies and legal status – affect the formation, breach, and interpretation of PCs. CDT is reconceptualized beyond an individual psychological mechanism to consider how dissonance may be sustained under external constraints. By integrating the EVLN framework (Hirschman, 1970; Rusbult et al., 1988), this study analyzes how structural constraints shape HSI' behavioral responses to dissonance, showing that agency is not assumed but institutionally filtered.

Additionally, this thesis contributes to management and organizational studies by highlighting how migration policy and legal status shape workplace dynamics. As retention grows more critical amid labor shortages and investments in sponsorship, the study sheds light on the overlooked experiences of HSIs and the conditions that influence their engagement. It underscores the need for context-sensitive approaches to managing diverse talent in a global workforce.

Practically, this study offers valuable insights for employers, HR professionals, and policymakers by illustrating how visa-related dependencies can undermine engagement and long-term retention, and by highlighting the importance of aligning legal structures with inclusive organizational practices to support migrant career development and Sweden's efforts to attract and retain global talent.

2. Legal Framework and Literature Review

This chapter reviews key scholarly perspectives relevant to the employment experiences of HSIs IT professionals in Sweden. The review considers the broader legal and structural factors that shape HSIs' professional realities, particularly in relation to Sweden's work-permit regime. Following this, it introduces the theoretical frameworks of PCT and CDT, supplemented with the EVLN model, to explore how expectations, perceptions, and emotional as well as behavioral responses evolve within the context of migration-related employment conditions.

2.1 Legal Framework of Work-Permits in Sweden

The growing demand for HSIs has contributed to the increasing presence of temporary migrant workers in the Swedish labor market (Emilsson, 2014; Carlbaum, 2021). As in response to labor shortages, Sweden undertook significant labor migration policy reforms in 2008 through a collaboration between the right-wing government and the Green Party (Neergaard & Woolfson, 2017). The primary objective behind these policy modifications was to facilitate the recruitment of foreign employees, positioning Sweden as having one of the most liberal labor migration frameworks among OECD countries (OECD, 2011; see also Berg & Spehar, 2013). Notably, the new policies did not specify particular industries or professions as criteria for eligibility, nor did they impose limits on the number of potential applicants (Wright et al., 2016). As a result, employers were granted the freedom to hire as many foreign employees as they wished across all sectors, provided that no suitable EU residents were available for the position (Regeringen, 2008). While the reform ostensibly aimed to promote economic efficiency, its implementation institutionalized unequal power relations by binding legal status to employer preferences (Frank, 2014; Frödin & Kjellberg, 2018). As a result, labor migrants came to be framed as economic instruments to address structural challenges such as an aging population and labor shortages, rather than as full members of society (Osanami Törngren & Holbrow, 2016; Groglopo et al., 2023).

Non-EU temporary labor migrants are especially vulnerable to policy changes, as their right to reside in Sweden – and by extension, the EU – is conditional on continuous employment. This

creates a chronic form of legal and economic precarity (Axelsson, 2017; Neergaard & Woolfson, 2017; Krifors, 2017; Frödin & Kjellberg, 2018; Corrado et al., 2023), whereby migrants must secure a job offer before arrival, remain employed to be able stay in country, and continually re-prove their worth at each permit renewal. Work-permits are typically issued for the duration of an employment contract, up to a maximum of two years at a time, and can be renewed multiple times as long as they continue to meet the conditions for employability and salary thresholds (Swedish Migration Agency, n.d. -e). Only after four consecutive years of full-time employment and uninterrupted legal status can migrants apply for permanent residence – effectively turning sustained labor market participation into the price of long-term belonging.

However, the process is far from straightforward. During the first two years of a work-permit, migrant employees are bound to a specific employer and occupation. In the subsequent two years, while they may change employers, they remain restricted to the same occupation (Woolfson et al., 2013; Olsson, 2016). More critically, the required four-year period must be completed in full – exactly four consecutive years. Even a brief shortfall of just a few days – such as completing only 3 years and 360 days – disqualifies the applicant from obtaining permanent residency at that point. Instead, they must apply for another time-limited extension – granted for two years and still restricted to the same occupation – before they can reapply for permanent residence (Swedish Migration Agency, n.d. -b, Swedish Migration Agency, n.d. -d). As a result, many migrants end up receiving their permanent residency in far more than four years.

These permit conditions also have significant consequences for labor migrants' access to social protections in cases of job loss. If a migrant employee loses their job, they must secure new employment within three months and reapply for a residence permit. Failure to do so results in deportation under the Aliens Act (2005:716, Chapter 7, Section 3). This legal precarity becomes especially evident when examining Sweden's unemployment insurance system. While the unemployment insurance system (*arbetslöshetskassa*) offers eligible workers up to one year of support, non-EU temporary migrants are effectively limited to just three months. Although they contribute like any other worker, their access is curtailed by the conditional nature of their residence: if they fail to secure a new job within three months, their permit expires and benefits

are revoked. In effect, they are structurally integrated into the labor market but excluded from full social protection.

This paradox reflects what Dauvergne and Marsden (2013) describe as the *ideological function of rights* in temporary migration regimes: while "rights-based frameworks offer the appearance of fairness, they often fail to address the underlying subordination embedded in migration regimes" (p. 529). In Sweden unemployment insurance is not compulsory, but for those who sign up and pay their dues to an arbetslöshetskassa, as most do, the ability to tap into the unemployment benefits when needed is in practice undermined by residence conditionality. For the class of migrants discussed here, because of the expiry of their work and residence permits within three months of the release from their employment contract, unemployment benefits are only available for a fraction of the time that would otherwise apply. This can be seen as symbolically including migrants while materially excluding them. As Näre and Maury (2024) and Bendixsen and Näre (2024) argue, migrants' access to rights remains conditional, partial, and dependent on uninterrupted labor market participation.

Therefore, scholars have increasingly questioned the ethical and structural consequences of this employer-driven model implemented in 2008. Wright et al. (2016) describe it as "the starkest manifestation of employer autonomy," (p. 3) where employers act as gatekeepers to both employment and legal residency. Carens's (2008) critiques visa regimes that tie migrants to specific employers as morally troubling, as they render workers vulnerable to coercion and abuse. As a result, in practice, migrant workers in Sweden often lack bargaining power – particularly in sectors with weak union representation such as IT, which attracts a significant share of HSI inflows (Cerna, 2009; Emilsson, 2014).

Frank (2014) further problematizes this framework by showing how the 2008 policy reforms marked a shift in the surveillance and disciplining of migrants, transferring responsibility from state authorities to private employers. As he explains, "If they do not [adapt], they risk losing their jobs and eventually being deported" (p. 416). In this system, migrants' legal status becomes contingent on their ability to continually meet employer expectations, fostering a precarious environment of constant adaptation and self-discipline. This shift introduces a flexible yet fragile

form of power that extends beyond the employment relationship, deeply affecting migrants' emotional, social, and professional stability. Consequently, by tightly linking legal status to employment, these restrictive policies create significant vulnerabilities for employer-tied non-EU migrant workers, leaving them highly susceptible to exploitation (Nakache, 2013). Research has also shown that migrants may feel pressured to accept substandard working conditions that differ from what was originally promised in their job offers (Frödin & Kjellberg, 2018), and those facing limited career progression often struggle to change workplaces or attain better conditions and professional fulfillment (Tharenou & Kulik, 2020). As Sager and Öberg (2017) argue in the context of asylum policy, Sweden's shift to temporary permits has reinforced a *continuum of deportability*, fostering a constant state of conditional belonging – a logic that becoming increasingly relevant in labor migration, where even highly skilled individuals face precarity due to the temporary and employer-dependent nature of their legal status.

Against this backdrop, recent policy developments make these issues even more pressing. Proposed changes – such as extending the citizenship timeline from five to eight years and introducing language and civic knowledge requirements (SOU 2025:1) – reflect the increasingly restrictive direction set by the Tidö Agreement, raising concerns among civil society actors that such measures could erode the rule of law and undermine Sweden's human rights commitments (Civil Rights Defenders, 2022).

In sum, Sweden's labor migration system, while designed to attract global talent, binds highly HSIs to restrictive conditions that limit mobility, undermine job security, and expose them to legal precarity. As recent policy shifts point toward further tightening, it becomes crucial to understand how these structural constraints are experienced and navigated in everyday life.

2.2 Psychological Contract Theory (PCT) and Legal Status

The PCT is a widely employed framework within the management literature to explain how individuals perceive and manage unwritten expectations defining their relationships with employers (see Rousseau, 1989, 1995; Lester & Kickul, 2001; Guest 2004; Conway & Briner 2011; Karani et al., 2022). It has traditionally been applied to organizational change contexts

such as restructuring and mergers (Beaumont & Harris, 2002; Bellou, 2007), and is widely used to explore individual-level outcomes of contract breaches, including job satisfaction, commitment, stress, and turnover (Gakovic & Tetrick, 2003; Griffin & Sutton, 2004; Lemire & Rouillard, 2005). While these studies emphasize that responses to breaches vary based on how PCs are interpreted, they often overlook how they are formed and disrupted within broader political and institutional contexts (Guest, 2004; Cullinane & Dundon, 2006; Casado & Caspersz, 2016). This gap is notable given the increasing importance of HSIs in global talent flows (Zikic, 2015; Crowley-Henry & Al Ariss, 2018). To date, no study has applied PCT to HSIs in Sweden, where employer-sponsored visa regimes tie legal residency directly to employment. In this setting, PCT provides a valuable lens to examine not only the content of expectations but how they are shaped, strained, and redefined under conditions of legal precarity.

2.2.1 The Psychological Contract (PC)

In management research, PCs refer to employees' implicit assumptions about career advancement, fair treatment, recognition, and inclusion (Guest 2004; Conway & Briner 2011). Unlike formal employment contracts, they are inherently subjective and informal, evolving continuously through perceived promises (Turnley & Feldman, 2000; Conway & Briner, 2002).

Argyris (1960) first introduced the concept of PC, emphasizing informal understandings between employees and supervisors. He suggested that mutual respect for these implicit norms could enhance performance and reduce grievances. Expanding on this, Levinson et al. (1962) highlighted how PCs also support employee well-being and motivation by fulfilling personal and professional needs. Yet, despite conceptual significance, empirical exploration of PC remained limited until the 1980s, when changing employment landscapes prompted renewed interest in their dynamics (Conway & Briner, 2011).

Contemporary conceptualizations of the PC were notably shaped by Rousseau (1989), who described it as an individual's beliefs about mutual obligations between themselves and their employer. Crucially, Rousseau highlighted that PCs are personal and promissory, emphasizing perceptions over formal agreements. What matters most is what employees believe has been promised − even if employers remain unaware or do not acknowledge these implicit

expectations. This perspective underscores the importance of examining how employees perceive their workplace relationships, particularly in contexts marked by broader contextual factors like legal uncertainty.

Rousseau (1990) further distinguished between *transactional* and *relational* PCs. Transactional contracts are characterized by short-term economic exchanges, whereas relational contracts involve trust, emotional investment, and long-term career development. Scholars argue that it is important for the employers to understand the nature of PCs, as it sends signals about employee expectations and shapes their responses when those expectations are unmet (Hui et al., 2004; O'Donohue et al., 2014).

It is also argued that, typically, employees enter workplaces holding relational expectations, when recruited explicitly for their expertise and encouraged to invest in the organization's long-term goals. However, when these expectations remain unmet, a PC *breach* occurs as the employee perceives that their organization has failed to fulfill one or more obligations within the PC (Robinson & Morrison, 2000). Such breaches represent *cognitive evaluations*, in which employees identify discrepancies between their expected and actual experiences. Common employee responses to breaches include reduced effort, diminished trust, often accompanied by negative attitudes toward the employer or job itself, affecting their productivity and effectiveness at work (Robinson & Rousseau, 1994; Bonache et al., 2007).

On the other hand, PC *violation* refers specifically to the emotional reactions – such as feelings of outrage, shock, resentment, or anger – that arise when breaches are perceived as fundamental betrayals of trust (Rousseau, 1989; Robinson & Rousseau, 1994). Thus, while breaches involve cognitive recognition of unmet promises, violations are emotional and often intense responses to those breaches.

Research consistently demonstrates that PC breaches and violations negatively impact employment outcomes, leading to decreased job satisfaction, reduced organizational commitment, and heightened intentions to leave the organization (see Guzzo et al., 1994; Kickul et al. 2004; Tekleab et al., 2005; Bonache et al., 2007; Zhao et al., 2007; De Clercq et al., 2021; He et al., 2023). The emotional intensity associated with PC violations particularly increases the

likelihood that employees will actively seek alternative employment opportunities, as turnover intentions are considered strong predictors of actual turnover behavior (Tett & Mayer, 1993; Hom & Kinicki, 2001; Zhao et al., 2007; Casado & Caspersz, 2023). Turnley and Feldman (2000) further highlight that employees experiencing violations prefer active job-seeking strategies over passive neglect of job responsibilities, primarily because job-seeking is perceived as lower-risk behavior than openly disengaging from work.

However, not all breaches inevitably escalate into violations or result in immediate behavioral changes. Whether a breach leads to decreased productivity, disengagement, or erosion of trust depends on how the breach is interpreted, its perceived severity, the availability of alternative employment, the quality of the employee–employer relationship, and the degree of job embeddedness (Robinson & Morrison, 2000; He et al., 2023). This study further argues that, in the context of labor migration, contextual factors – such as legal status, job dependency, and shifting policy environments – can significantly shape how individuals perceive and respond to perceived breaches or violations.

2.2.2 The Migration Context and Constrained Mobility

While much of the literature assumes that dissatisfied employees respond by seeking alternative employment (Turnley & Feldman, 2000), this option may be unavailable or highly constrained for labor migrants due to broader factors such as work-permit conditions, sponsorship requirements, and legal uncertainties. Even when their PCs are severely violated, these structural constraints limit their mobility, highlighting the need to account for broader contextual factors when analyzing employee PCs. This perspective aligns with calls for more contextually grounded interpretations of the PC (Guest, 2004; Cullinane & Dundon, 2006; Casado & Caspersz, 2016).

Casado and Caspersz (2016) offer a significant extension of PCT by contextualizing the employment relationships of HSIs within broader institutional, political, and economic environments. Their work moves beyond Rousseau's (1989) individual-level focus on promissory expectations, arguing that PCs are also shaped by migration policies, labor market structures, and third-party actors such as recruiters. This contextualized lens underscores the

importance of external forces in shaping both normative expectations and the organizational capacity to fulfill them. However, while their study highlights systematic uncertainty and adaptation pressures faced by migrants, it does not directly engage with *legal status* – particularly the implications of employer-tied permits – as a central structuring force in the formation or breach of PCs. This study builds on their insights but shifts the analytical focus to legal dependency as a key variable that might limit agency, reshape expectations, and constrain responses to contract violations. By foregrounding the impact of employer-tied permits in Sweden, this study extends PCT to account for the *structural immobility* imposed by labor migration regimes, offering a deeper understanding of how legal precarity mediates HSIs' perceptions of fairness, and career progression.

This immobility is captured through the concept of *job lock*, which extends PCT by recognizing the structural constraints that limit migrant workers' agency**.** Originally developed in economic literature, the concept of job lock referred to the inability to leave a job due to non-transferable benefits like pensions or healthcare (Berger et al., 2004; Adams, 2008). However, psychological perspectives have expanded this view by exploring the emotional and cognitive dimensions of being *stuck at work* (Rosse & Miller, 1984; Rosse & Saturay, 2004). From this perspective, job lock is not only an institutional constraint but also a psychological condition – shaped by fear, resignation, or the rationalized belief that staying may eventually yield stability or security.

Building on these insights, this study examines the relevance of job lock to the experiences of HSIs within the framework of the PC. It considers how external legal constraints and internal psychological dynamics jointly shape migrants' responses to unmet expectations. In particular, it examines how Sweden's employer-sponsored visa system reinforces job lock by limiting career mobility, fostering emotional exhaustion, and contributing to professional stagnation – even within sectors typically associated with opportunity and advancement.

2.3 Cognitive Dissonance (CD)

To explain how employees make sense of breaches in the PC, this study draws on CDT, developed by Festinger (1957). CDT describes the psychological discomfort that arises when

individuals hold conflicting beliefs, expectations, or behaviors. Festinger argued that people are motivated to reduce this internal tension by striving for consistency, prompting behavioral or cognitive efforts to reconcile the dissonance. His seminal work, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*, marked a shift in psychology by challenging the notion of humans as purely rational agents, highlighting instead their tendency to rationalize attitudes and actions.

Building on Festinger's work, Aronson (1969) emphasized the role of *self-concept* in CD, arguing that dissonance is strongest when an inconsistency threatens one's core self-image. For instance, individuals who view themselves as highly professional will experience acute discomfort if forced to act against those professional values. As Aronson noted, "if dissonance exists it is because the individual's behavior is inconsistent with his self-concept" (Aronson, 1969, p. 27). This self-consistency perspective helps explain why the same inconsistency may distress one person but not another – dissonance depends on personal standards and identity.

However, self-concept is also shaped by the broader social, cultural, and structural contexts individuals inhabit. As a result, the experience and resolution of CD are also deeply conditioned by these external realities (Aronson, 1969). Research has shown that cultural norms, in particular, influence the situations that trigger dissonance, and the strategies used to resolve it. For example, in collectivist settings, dissonance often stems from conflicts between personal desires and group expectations, while in individualistic contexts, it arises from internal contradictions (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Hoshino-Browne et al., 2005). Within migration studies, CDT has been used to explain the cultural conflict many migrants face, such as the tension between heritage values and host-country expectations (Berry, 1997; Bourhis et al., 1997; Zhang, 2023). According to *self-affirmation theory*, migrants can buffer against this identity threat by reflecting on alternative, valued aspects of the self – such as cultural heritage or communal roles – which helps them manage sustained normative conflicts (Steele, 1988).

While cultural explanations are valuable, they are not sufficient to explain the prolonged nature of dissonance among migrants facing structural barriers. Bauder (2003) demonstrates how systemic barriers – such as non-recognition of foreign credentials, discriminatory hiring practices, and rigid labor market structures – undermine HSIs ability to access appropriate

employment. These structural exclusions not only waste human capital but also produce long-term professional marginalization and psychosocial dissonance. Similarly, the *healthy immigrant effect* is shown to decline over time, as cumulative exposure to social and economic hardship erodes migrants' well-being (Hill et al., 2012). These insights reinforce that dissonance is not solely a product of inner conflict or culture shock, but can be structurally sustained through inequality and exclusion.

The workplace is a particularly important site of dissonance. Research in organizational behavior shows that CDT is commonly experienced in ethical conflicts, emotional labor, and escalation of commitment (Hinojosa et al., 2016). Managerial scholars have long recognized CDT's relevance: it has been applied to understand employee well-being and engagement in human resource management (Shipp et al., 2013), to unpack decision-making and strategic inertia in corporate governance (Westphal & Bednar, 2008), to examine entrepreneurial identity tensions (Ambos & Birkinshaw, 2010), and to explore the interplay between workload and emotional exhaustion (Bhave & Glomb, 2013). This widespread application underscores why CDT provides a powerful lens for analyzing how employees navigate conflicts between their expectations and workplace realities.

Traditionally, this theory assumes that people can actively restore cognitive consistency – through internal processes such as changing their attitudes, reinterpreting events, or adjusting expectations. However, this assumption often implies a degree of behavioral autonomy that may not apply universally. In labor migration contexts, broader structural constraints – such as employer-dependent visas or the risk of deportation – can significantly restrict labor migrants' capacity to act on this dissonance (Akbary & Kazemipur, 2023; Xue & Sun, 2024). Under such conditions, they may be unable to resolve dissonance through meaningful behavioral change and instead rely on passive cognitive strategies such as rationalization or downward comparison, which makes CD relevant for this study (Le & Stockdale, 2008; Filipek & Polkowska, 2020). This study uses CDT to examine how migrants internally experience and cope with unmet expectations when structural constraints limit their ability to respond externally. By focusing on how dissonance is endured or rationalized, the theory helps explain the psychological and emotional toll of sustained legal and professional precarity. In such cases, when dissonance is

endured rather than actively processed or resolved (Zhang, 2023), it can lead to tangible organizational consequences – such as emotional exhaustion, disengagement, and turnover intent (Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2012) – as well as structural issues like *brain waste*, where HSIs remain underemployed (Bauder, 2003; Liversage, 2009).

While CDT offers a powerful lens for understanding how individuals seek to resolve psychological discomfort, it is seldom applied in contexts where behavioral responses are systematically constrained by structural forces. This study extends CDT by examining how visa dependency and organizational dynamics transform dissonance from a temporary tension into a sustained psychological condition. Rather than viewing dissonance as an internally contained process, the analysis situates it within broader socio-legal structures – highlighting how immigration policies, workplace practices, and systemic inequalities shape migrants' capacity to restore cognitive alignment. By foregrounding this concept of *structurally sustained dissonance*, the study provides insight into why HSIs may disengage or stagnate. This condition reflects a prolonged psychological strain, where structural constraints limit the resolution of dissonance and instead normalize a cautious, risk-averse orientation.

2.3.1 Navigating CD: Exit, Voice, Loyalty, or Neglect?

While CDT offers valuable insight into understanding how individuals internally manage psychological discomfort, it does not offer a clear typology of how people behave in response to dissatisfaction – especially under constraint. To address this gap, this study also incorporates Hirschman's (1970) Exit, Voice, Loyalty, and Neglect (EVLN) framework. Unlike CDT, which focuses on internal belief adjustment, EVLN classifies the external and observable ways people respond to dissatisfaction. Together, these frameworks offer a more complete picture of how legal status and workplace dynamics shape both the internal and external dimensions of HSIs experience.

Hirschman's (1970) EVL framework was originally developed to explain how individuals respond to the decline of firms, organizations, or states, and has since been widely applied across disciplines including political science (Schoppa, 2022), organizational behavior (Sabino, 2024), and migration studies (Hoffman, 2010). Hirschman conceptualized *exit* as the act of withdrawing

from a deteriorating relationship – such as quitting a job or emigrating – while *voice* refers to expressing dissatisfaction in hopes of effecting change. Voice is defined as "any attempt at all to change, rather than to escape from, an objectionable state of affairs" (Hirschman, 1970, p. 30). *Loyalty*, the third dimension, functions as a moderating force that can delay both exit and voice, sustaining individuals' commitment even amid dissatisfaction. Subsequent scholars have expanded the model, most notably Rusbult et al. (1988), who introduced *neglect* – a passive response characterized by disengagement or silent endurance when other options seem inaccessible. Building on this, the model highlights how the cost of exit, the likelihood of voice being heard, and the interplay of loyalty and inertia collectively shape behavioral responses. Hirschman (1970) emphasized that voice is only likely to be exercised when individuals believe it will lead to meaningful change, while loyalty can serve to either encourage or suppress voice depending on the surrounding context.

Recent scholarship has further highlighted the complexities of navigating these strategies under structural constraint. Davidson and Meyers (2016), in their study of Israeli journalists, illustrate how decisions to exit or remain are shaped not only by individual dissatisfaction but also by professional norms, institutional culture, and perceived capacity to effect change. They emphasize that exit and voice are not always binary choices but are often negotiated and interwoven with a sense of belonging or commitment. From a transnational mobility perspective, Hoffmann (2010) applies the EVL framework to migrant experiences, demonstrating how exit, voice, and loyalty frequently overlap in the lived experiences of migrants who remain politically and emotionally engaged with both host and origin countries. He demonstrates how migrants' decisions are shaped by structural conditions in both contexts and suggests that transnational ties may simultaneously intensify loyalty and facilitate new forms of voice. Hoffmann's work thus reinforces the relevance of Hirschman's framework in understanding how migrants respond to legal, political, and social constraints – offering a valuable lens for theorizing how macro-structural factors shape micro-level behavioral strategies in migration.

This study uses the EVLN framework to explore how structural constraints influence migrants' responses to potential dissonance, not by assuming that all responses are equally accessible, but by showing how such constraints filter behavior – limiting some options while making others

more likely. These constrained responses, in turn, shape HSIs' career trajectories and influence how they perceive their PCs, as well as their sense of inclusion and belonging within Swedish workplaces.

3. Methodological Approach

3.1 Research Methodology

This study adopts an interpretivist epistemology, assuming that knowledge is co-constructed through social interactions and shaped by context (Bell et al., 2022). In line with this approach, a cross-sectional qualitative design was chosen to explore the lived experiences of HSIs from non-EU countries who moved to Sweden for work or study. As Tkaczyk and Krzyżanowska (2013) highlight, qualitative research is particularly suited to investigating how individuals understand and interpret their social world – making it appropriate for capturing the nuanced and context-bound experiences of migrants. The topic was investigated through qualitative methods, as this approach enabled a deeper exploration of how HSIs perceive and make sense of their experiences within the Swedish labor market. Unlike quantitative methods, which may overlook nuance and context, qualitative inquiry made it possible to uncover the subjective meanings, emotional responses, and coping strategies migrants develop in navigating legal and organizational constraints. Semi-structured interviews were selected for their ability to elicit rich, in-depth insights into how interviewees navigate complex socio-legal and institutional environments (Bryman, 2012). This method also provided flexibility, allowing questions to adapt organically to each interviewee's narrative.

3.2 Interview Process

Three pilot interviews were conducted prior to the main data collection phase. These interviews helped to refine the interview guide by identifying ambiguities, ensuring logical flow, and assessing whether questions elicited meaningful responses (Van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2002). As a result, several questions were rephrased for clarity, and the structure of the guide was slightly adjusted to promote a more natural conversational flow.

Each interview was conducted by two researchers, with one assuming the role of primary interviewer while the other took observational notes and contributed follow-up questions. This collaborative dynamic enabled more attentive listening and deeper exploration of emerging

themes (Roulston, 2010). The interview guide (see Appendix A) consisted of open-ended questions that addressed key themes including migration motives, professional identity, workplace integration, legal status, career trajectories, and perceptions of inclusion and exclusion in the workplace. Although the guide ensured consistency across interviews, interviewees were encouraged to elaborate on areas of personal significance and give examples of their experiences, allowing new insights to emerge organically (Rubin, 2012).

All interviews were conducted in English, which was either the working language or a second language for both the interviewees and the researchers. Interview durations ranged from 45 to 60 minutes.

3.3 Sampling Strategy

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to recruit HSIs working in Sweden's IT sector who could offer rich, experience-based insights into the research questions (Palinkas et al., 2015). To be eligible, interviewees had to: (1) hold at least a bachelor's degree, (2) originate from a non-EU country, and (3) have worked in Sweden for at least one year. These criteria ensured that individuals had accumulated sufficient legal and professional experience to meaningfully reflect on their migration journeys, workplace integration, and career development. As Coyne (1997) notes, purposive sampling allows for the selection of key informants with relevant experiential knowledge – those considered *information-rich cases.* This approach enabled the study to deliberately focus on migrants with academic qualifications who were employed in IT roles, and whose lived experiences could bring depth and nuance to the analysis.

In addition to purposive sampling, this study employed snowball sampling as a complementary technique to reach interviewees who may not have been accessible through formal or public channels. Snowball sampling involves asking initial interviewees to recommend others who share relevant characteristics. As Patton (2002, cited in Suri, 2011) explains, this method creates a chain of referrals, enabling the sample to grow organically through trusted social networks.

Snowball sampling is particularly suitable for qualitative research on sensitive or under-researched topics, where trust and insider knowledge are critical (Biernacki & Waldorf,

1981). In this study, interviewees were encouraged to refer others from their professional or personal networks who met the inclusion criteria. Referrals continued until the sample reached thematic saturation (Bell et al., 2022).

To address concerns about the potential homogeneity of snowball samples, often resulting from reliance on tightly connected networks, referrals were intentionally initiated from multiple starting points. Interviewees were recruited through varied personal, professional, and community-based channels, allowing the process to unfold across distinct social circles. This strategy promoted greater diversity within the sample by capturing a broader range of migration experiences and workplace contexts, thereby helping to mitigate sample bias.

3.4 Background Information of Interviewees

A total of 20 non-EU migrant IT professionals currently working in Sweden participated in this study. Interviewees were selected based on their status as HSIs, with representation from India, Türkiye, and Azerbaijan. Their ages ranged from 25 to 45 years, with the majority falling between 30 and 40.

All interviewees held at least a bachelor's degree, with 9 of them possessing master's degrees, and an average of 9 years of work experience in the IT sector. In line with the European Migration Network's definition of HSIs (EMN, 2007; Iredale, 2001), all interviewees had specialized expertise and prior professional experience in their field before relocating to Sweden.

Interviewees arrived in Sweden through two main pathways: work-permits and study visas, with subsequent transitions into the labor market. At the time of the interviews, 14 interviewees held valid work-permits, while 6 had obtained permanent residency or Swedish citizenship. Their length of stay in Sweden ranged from 1 to 7 years, and all had been working in IT roles for at least one year – an inclusion criterion for this study. A summary of interviewee profiles is provided in the Appendices (Appendix B).

3.5 Data Collection and Coding

With the interviewees' consent, all interviews were transcribed verbatim to ensure that important responses were accurately captured for analysis (Bryman, 2012). Prior to coding, the transcripts were reviewed by the researchers to revise overly complex sentence structures and improve readability. Given the qualitative nature of this study, thematic analysis was adopted as the most appropriate method for analyzing the interview data. While other approaches such as discourse analysis or narrative analysis focus on the structure of language or the chronology of individual stories, this study was primarily concerned with identifying recurring patterns of meaning across interviewees' experiences. Thematic analysis was therefore particularly well suited, as it allows for the systematic identification, organization, and interpretation of shared themes within a dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

This method aligns with the study's aim of exploring how HSIs perceive and navigate work-permit dependency, career development, and inclusion in the Swedish IT sector. Thematic analysis also supported a comparative, cross-case analysis of experiences, enabling the development of broader insights grounded in individual narratives. Furthermore, its abductive orientation enabled a dynamic interplay between empirical data and existing theoretical frameworks (Braun & Clarke, 2006). While initial themes emerged organically from interviewees' accounts, they were later refined through dialogue with relevant literature, allowing for an analytically flexible yet rigorous approach suited to the exploratory nature of this research. The analysis followed the structured phases, ensuring a systematic yet adaptive process for generating meaningful insights from the narratives.

The first phase involved familiarization with the data, which was essential for immersing in the interview content and gaining a holistic understanding of interviewees' experiences. This was followed by initial coding, conducted independently by both researchers. Coding refers to the process of identifying and labelling specific segments of the data that capture important ideas, patterns, or meanings (Charmaz, 2006). Each transcript was reviewed line by line to generate codes that reflected key aspects of the interviewees' responses.

After the independent coding stage, the researchers engaged in a collaborative process to compare, refine, and consolidate their initial codes into broader thematic categories. This dialogue-driven approach strengthened the analytical validity of the study by promoting reflexivity and reducing potential interpretive bias (Guest et al., 2014).

The data was analyzed manually, with the researchers using color coding to highlight key ideas and recurring concepts across transcripts. Similar codes were grouped and refined into overarching themes and subthemes, which were developed abductively – emerging directly from the data rather than being imposed by a pre-existing theoretical framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

To ensure analytical rigor, several quality assurance strategies were employed, including dual coding, memo writing, and the maintenance of a transparent audit trail documenting key analytic decisions. These practices supported ongoing reflexivity and traceability throughout the analysis. Additionally, researcher triangulation – through paired coding, joint reflection, and iterative discussion – enhanced the credibility, depth, and dependability of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Bryman, 2016). The resulting thematic structure (see Appendix C) reflects recurring patterns identified across interviews. In total, three major themes and several sub-themes were developed, forming the analytical foundation for the subsequent presentation of findings.

3.6 Methodological Considerations and Limitations

As with any qualitative study, this research faced several methodological limitations. First, although English was the shared working language, it was not the first language for most interviewees. This may have limited the expression of complex thoughts or emotions, particularly on sensitive topics.

Second, the study may be subject to self-selection bias, as interviewees were primarily recruited through personal, community, and professional networks. This could have favored individuals who are more socially connected or confident in sharing their experiences. However, as noted earlier, recruitment was deliberately initiated from multiple entry points to help mitigate this limitation.

Third, time constraints posed a practical challenge during data collection. Several interviewees had demanding work schedules, and coordinating interviews required significant flexibility. While both online and in-person formats were offered, all interviews were ultimately conducted online and occasionally under time pressure. In one case, an interviewee limited the session to 45 minutes, which constrained the depth of discussion. On two occasions, interviewees missed scheduled interviews, requiring rescheduling. These common challenges in qualitative research occasionally disrupted interview flow and may have affected the richness of some responses. Nevertheless, a sufficient number of interviews were conducted to ensure a diverse range of perspectives and achieve theoretical saturation.

Finally, language-related challenges extended beyond the interviews. Some relevant Swedish research on migrant integration was inaccessible due to language barriers. Nonetheless, the study drew on a broad and diverse range of English-language academic literature and policy reports, providing a robust foundation for understanding the studied phenomenon.

While these limitations may have influenced the breadth and depth of data collected, the study's aim was not to generalize findings but to offer context-rich insight into the lived experiences of HSIs in Sweden's IT sector (Tracy, 2010). These reflections enhance the transparency of the research process and highlight areas for future inquiry.

Internal validity was supported by grounding findings in interviewees' narratives and maintaining a close connection to the data through abductive coding. External validity, or transferability, is limited by the study's context but may offer relevant insights for HSIs in similar structural conditions. Reliability was enhanced through process documentation, a codebook, and iterative reflection – strengthening the transparency and consistency of the research.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

Ethical integrity is central to social research, particularly when engaging potentially vulnerable groups. This study followed the four core ethical principles outlined by Diener and Crandall

(1978, cited in Bryman, 2012): informed consent, avoiding harm, protecting privacy, and ensuring confidentiality.

Prior to participation, all interviewees were provided with detailed written information outlining the study's aims, their rights, data protection measures, and the voluntary nature of their involvement. Informed consent was obtained before each interview through a digital consent form (see Appendix D). Interviewees were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Special attention was paid to ensuring that the language used in these materials was accessible and not overly technical, particularly given that English was not the first language of many interviewees.

Given the personal and potentially sensitive nature of the topics discussed – such as legal status, work-permit dependency, and experiences of exclusion – interview questions were designed to be open-ended, non-intrusive, and respectful. Interviewees were reminded at the beginning and throughout the interview that they were free to skip any question or pause the interview at any time. The researchers were attentive to signs of discomfort or distress and adapted their approach when interviewees appeared hesitant or emotionally affected by certain topics. Fortunately, no serious signs of distress were observed during the interviews, but the team was prepared to offer follow-up support or referrals if needed.

To protect anonymity, pseudonyms were used, and all identifying details were removed during data processing. Additionally, gender-neutral pronouns (they/them) were used when referring to interviewees to avoid assumptions about gender identity and to ensure respectful, inclusive representation. Data was securely stored and accessible only to the research team. Given the potential legal vulnerability of HSIs, efforts were made to create a psychologically safe environment and minimize power imbalances. Ethical safeguards were embedded throughout the research process to ensure interviewees' rights, dignity, and emotional wellbeing were fully respected (Artal & Rubenfeld, 2017).

4. Analysis and Findings

4.1 Fractured Expectations: The PC from Formation to Breach

For HSIs, the decision to move to Sweden was rarely spontaneous. It reflected long-term goals and a belief in Sweden as a fair, stable, and competence-driven society. These assumptions shaped a PC – not only with employers but with the state. Section 4.1.1 explores how these expectations formed prior to arrival and how early encounters with the labor market revealed the first signs of breach. Section 4.1.2 examines how shifting rules and bureaucratic barriers after arrival began to undermine that trust. Together, the sections trace how the PC was formed – and how, for many, it began to erode.

4.1.1 Imagined Meritocracy: The Formation of Pre-Migration Expectations and the First Signs of Breaches

For those interviewed in this study, choosing Sweden was a deliberate, comparative decision shaped by long-term goals, such as career advancement, legal security, and quality of life. Rather than responding to a single opportunity, most weighed various destinations before committing – viewing Sweden as aligned with their personal and professional aspirations. These assumptions formed a PC – an internalized sense of what they believed they would gain by investing their skills and lives in the Swedish system.

Many described Sweden as an ideal destination, using words like “progressive” (Interviewee 4), “stable” (Interviewee 1), and “teeming with opportunities” (Interviewee 5). This perception was shaped by Sweden’s reputation as a knowledge-based economy that values innovation and inclusivity (OECD, 2019). Additionally, interviewees expected that their careers would be driven by “competence” (Interviewee 12), “qualifications” (Interviewee 17), and “job performance” (Interviewee 6). Following Casado and Caspersz (2016), these *normative expectations* – centering on career advancement and merit-based progression – were not based on explicit promises from employers, but were instead grounded in Sweden’s broader socio-economic reputation as a progressive, innovation-driven society where competence and qualifications are

assumed to guide professional outcomes. This belief in a meritocratic and stable system was particularly evident among interviewees who cited Sweden's favorable work-permit and citizenship policies – as well as its promise of long-term personal stability – as decisive factors shaping their migration decisions. As Interviewee 2 explained:

> I chose Sweden because of its democracy, and I knew their work-permits were favorable for me as a highly skilled migrant.

Similarly, Interviewee 1 highlighted how citizenship timelines shaped their decision:

> When I moved to Sweden, I had other countries in mind. Even after moving here, I was still thinking about Switzerland. What changed my mind was that I checked Switzerland's citizenship requirements, which take 10 years. That number really made an impact on me – it reflects how friendly or welcoming a country is.

This comparison is revealing. While Switzerland's long naturalization timeline signaled exclusivity, Sweden's shorter path to citizenship was seen as a marker of openness and long-term inclusion. Such policy signals were not viewed as mere bureaucratic details, but as reflections of deeper societal values. For many interviewees, this shaped a PC that extended beyond the employer, grounded in a broader moral interpretation of Sweden as a society. This illustrates how national frameworks – such as immigration and citizenship policies – play a formative role in shaping migrants' expectations, reinforcing the idea that PCs are influenced not only by organizational dynamics but also by wider institutional and socio-political contexts (Guest, 2004; Cullinane & Dundon, 2006).

Among those who entered through academic pathways, overall perceptions of Sweden remained consistent with those of interviewees without a local degree. However, interviewees who studied at Swedish institutions developed a distinct PC: they believed that obtaining a local degree would improve their employability and ease their integration. As Interviewee 8 put it, "I thought having a Swedish degree would make everything easier." In this context, pursuing a degree was more than an academic goal – it was a strategic move to demonstrate cultural and institutional fit. This effort reflected an implicit expectation that such investment would be recognized and rewarded

through greater access to job opportunities and inclusion in the workplace – an expectation embedded within their PC.

However, as interviewees' expectations collided with the realities of the Swedish labor market, many migrants engaged in a continuous cognitive evaluation of PC fulfillment – assessing whether the system's implicit promises were truly being upheld (Morrison & Robinson, 1997). A recurring source of disillusionment was the administrative complexity they encountered, ranging from "visa processing delays" (Interviewee 7) to frustrations over "how challenging it is to change jobs" (Interviewee 12), which sharply contrasted with the imagined openness and abundance of opportunities. For many, it became evident that even locally obtained qualifications were insufficient without the "right employer backing" (Interviewee 14). As Interviewee 8 recounted, despite holding a Swedish degree and strong technical skills, they struggled to secure employment because many employers were reluctant to handle the complexities of visa sponsorship.

These barriers were not perceived as minor inconveniences but as early signs that the system they trusted to reward competence might not function as expected. They served as symbolic markers of institutional inconsistency, gradually eroding trust in the fairness and reliability of the broader framework. For many, this signaled a breach of the PC – not just a personal setback, but a rupture in the societal promise Sweden was thought to uphold. Although existing literature often links PC breaches to managerial failure, scholars such as Cullinane and Dundon (2006) and Tekleab et al. (2019) emphasize the role of broader institutional contexts. While not focused on migration, their work offers a useful lens to understand how state-level policies – in this context, restrictive work-permit systems or administrative barriers – can act as external disruptors of the social exchange. This study extends their insights by showing how such policies undermine migrants' expectations of fairness, opportunity, and inclusion at a structural level.

Similarly, Sweden's self-presentation as an English-accessible country also challenged interviewees' expectations of integration. While nearly all interviewees agreed that Swedish was not essential for securing employment in the tech sector, the country's international image gave

rise to broader assumptions about ease of social and professional inclusion. As Interviewee 8 recalled:

> Before moving to Sweden, I thought Sweden was an English-speaking country, as it is how it looks from outside. That's absolutely what you read or hear. [...] Suppose you're in Germany, you really need to know the language, even to apply for a master's. But that you know from the beginning. Unlike Sweden.

This example further demonstrates how initial expectation-setting shapes PCs: guided by Sweden's reputation as an English-accessible society, many migrants assumed language would not hinder their inclusion (Rousseau, 1995; Conway & Briner, 2011). Upon entering workplaces, however, they discovered that informal Swedish proficiency – and nuanced cultural fluency – plays a decisive role in social acceptance and belonging. This mismatch between anticipated and actual language expectations highlights the critical influence on breaches of PC, a dynamic explored in the following sections.

4.1.2 From Stability to Uncertainty: The Changing PC

The initially formulated PC was further challenged by shifts in Sweden's migration policies, particularly in the wake of the Tidö Agreement. Crucially, all interviewees had migrated to Sweden as labor migrants under the earlier, more stable regulatory framework. Many had made long-term life decisions – pursuing education, settling families, or turning down opportunities elsewhere – based on that system. The proposed changes were thus experienced as a breach of the PC with Sweden itself, retroactively altering the conditions they had trusted. As Interviewee 2 put it: "They're now discussing changes to citizenship and work-permit rules, but many of us chose Sweden based on the current system. If those restrictions had been in place back then, I wouldn't have chosen to come."

For others, the proposed changes were not just inconvenient but symbolically significant. Interviewee 5 emphasized that "eight years for citizenship is a long time – almost 20% of your career," while Interviewee 14 explained that study years are not counted at all, which stretches the timeline even further. While most considered the language requirement reasonable, the uncertainty surrounding implementation generated frustration and anxiety.

This uncertainty produced what several interviewees described as an *emotional fatigue* – comparing the process to "a marathon you're running but never finish" (Interviewee 14). This sentiment reveals how deeply migrants had internalized a moral and civic contract with the Swedish state – one not codified in law, but built on perceived reciprocity and fairness. The idea that these terms could now be redefined retroactively left them feeling vulnerable. As Interviewee 18 reflected, "I'm paying for my pension, and stuff. Like they... I don't know, pushing me to leave... the new rules, actually they're pushing me right now."

The nature of these expectations further suggest that migrants had developed a relational PC with the Swedish state. Their investments and willingness to comply with bureaucratic demands were not just pragmatic – they reflected a belief in a long-term, trust-based relationship in which integration efforts would be met with stability. While research on PC has largely focused on organizational settings, examining the distinction of PC between temporary and permanent employment (Millward & Hopkins, 1998; Coyle-Shapiro & Kessler, 2002; Guest et al., 2003; Allan et al., 2021), these insights offer a useful lens for understanding migrant-state dynamics. Based on these studies, individuals in temporary roles are typically associated with more transactional PCs, characterized by short-term, and economic exchange. By extension, migrants on temporary work-permits might also be expected to hold similarly transactional contracts, shaped by the limited duration and conditionality of their legal status. Yet the findings of this study suggest that many migrants develop relational expectations toward the host state as a result of long-term commitments, and that these expectations intensify when inclusion is signaled through clear residency pathways. Therefore, breaches were felt especially deeply because the perceived relationship was built not merely on legal compliance, but on mutual commitment.

Even those already settled in Sweden expressed concern that recent and proposed policy changes might deter future talent or prompt current migrants to leave. In addition, several interviewees emphasized that new requirements should apply only to future arrivals, as Interviewee 10 explained: "I was offered a job and migrated to Sweden knowing that I would get permanent residency under certain conditions. I believe new conditions should only apply to immigrants who migrate after the decision takes effect in law."

These concerns arise even at a time when Sweden is also positioning itself as a destination for global talent. In 2024, the Swedish Migration Agency introduced a new framework to prioritize and accelerate work-permit applications for highly qualified workers, including managerial occupations and roles requiring advanced higher education. Employers recruiting such workers can now receive additional support to complete applications correctly, and – provided that all documents are submitted from the start – receive decisions within 30 days (Swedish Migration Agency, 2024). These policy signals help shape the PC of future HSIs by suggesting a streamlined and opportunity-rich environment.

Yet for many interviewees, these reforms appeared paradoxical. While one set of policies seeks to ease entry for highly skilled newcomers, another moves to tighten the conditions for long-term inclusion – through stricter requirements. This disconnect left many interviewees feeling that the system rewards arrival but complicates permanence. They described Sweden's existing permit structures as "sidelined – creating a system that simultaneously invites and restricts" (Interviewee 15). The result is a growing sense of unpredictability, where access to opportunity is shaped not only by skill or merit, but also by timing, as rules change rapidly, and by the legal category under which one enters (see also Philipson Isaac, 2024).

This sense of institutional inconsistency was further amplified by real-time policy developments. In March 2025, while this thesis was still being written, the Swedish Migration Agency (2025) introduced stricter procedures for citizenship applicants – including mandatory in-person appearances, expanded documentation requirements, and over twelve pages of questionnaires – resulting in a 74 percent drop in granted citizenships since then (Löfgren, 2025). These substantial changes, implemented mid-process for many applicants, signaled a growing pattern of legal unpredictability that threatened the perceived stability of Sweden's migration regime. In a context where the rules appeared to shift without warning, many interviewees felt that the PC they had entered into had been silently rewritten, forcing them to reconsider long-term plans based on terms they had never agreed to (Rousseau, 1989). This perceived breach was deeply emotional, signaling a sense of PC violation and generating heightened anxiety about their future

in Sweden. As Interviewee 13 explained: “You hear about the potential changes in the news every day [...] It creates pressure and stress in your mind.” These shifting conditions further eroded migrants’ trust in the institutional environment and raised broader concerns about their long-term inclusion and sense of belonging in Swedish society.

In summary, the preceding analysis has traced the *pull factors* that drew interviewees to Sweden – perceived as implicit promises embedded in the country’s narrative of inclusivity, stability, and opportunity. However, as shifting policy landscapes, legal ambiguities, and hidden cultural expectations unraveled these assumptions, migrants experienced mounting dissonance between their imagined futures and lived realities. These findings underscore how broader contextual forces (Casado & Caspersz, 2016) shape both the content and breach of the PC, and how these ruptures manifest emotionally and strategically in migrants’ lives. The next section explores how HSIs navigate this dissonance and what these responses reveal about the long-term consequences of a system that simultaneously attracts global talent and renders their futures precarious.

4.2 Legal Dependency and Job Lock – The Professional Cost of Precaution

The following sections examine how employer-tied work permits constrain career decision-making and long-term professional trajectories among HSIs in Sweden. As discussed in Section 4.2.1, although the two-year requirement to remain with a specific employer was initially accepted as part of the PC, this dependency often extends beyond the expected period, raising questions about how temporary compromises evolve into persistent constraints. Section 4.2.2 shifts attention to the lingering effects of legal precarity over the long term, even in the absence of structural obstacles and work-permit restrictions. By centering legal status, the sections move focus from individual limitations to the institutional conditions that shape HSIs' career trajectories.

4.2.1 Staying to Stay: When Career Choices are Legal Strategies

The structural obstacles outlined in Section 2.1 – such as employer-dependent permits, rigid permanent residency requirements, and restricted access to social protections – significantly shaped the content of interviewees’ PCs after arriving in Sweden. Faced with these constraints

many lowered their expectations for meaningful career development, advancement, or recognition in order to protect their legal status and preserve a sense of stability. Interviewees consistently described a sense of being "professionally stuck" (Interviewee 19). Their legal status being directly tied to their employer, rendered even the idea of changing jobs a high-stakes gamble.

As Interviewee 2 explained: "Even though I am unhappy, I stay. If I move [companies], I'd have to restart the permit process, and there's no guarantee it would be approved. If not, I have to leave the country." This quote illustrates the psychological strain that emerges when aspirations for career mobility are in direct tension with the risks of legal instability. While CDT (Festinger, 1957) helps frame this gap between values and action – the desire for professional growth versus the imperative to remain in place – what stands out more clearly in this context is how structural dependency transforms career agency. Rather than resolving dissonance through behavioral responses such as exit or disengagement, as predicted by traditional PC models (Turnley & Feldman, 2000) or EVLN (Hirschman, 1970; Rusbult et al., 1988), many migrants engaged in cognitive reframing. By interpreting stagnation as a form of strategic self-preservation, they actively worked to reduce psychological strain while maintaining their legal status – illustrating a passive, yet deliberate, coping strategy aligned with CDT's internal resolution mechanisms (Le & Stockdale, 2008). Interviewee 1 described how, "all my professional efforts were focused on securing PR," while Interviewee 6 observed that migrants tend to "stay and work harder to avoid losing our position and therefore being sent back" – not out of loyalty, but to avoid triggering a legal crisis. In this context, what may appear as loyalty in EVLN terms is more accurately understood as a calculated response to constraint. These adjustments reveal how employer-dependent permits reshape both affective ties and behavioral responses to dissatisfaction, blurring the boundary between individual coping and structural coercion.

Constant policy changes further entrenched this state of immobility. Although official Swedish migration policy provides a two-year work-permit with a three-month job-seeking window upon termination, several interviewees reported receiving only six-month permits tied to their probationary employment period (Swedish Migration Agency, n.d. -c). Critically, if a migrant did not pass probation, they were not granted the three-month job-seeking window but were instead

required to leave the country immediately. This dynamic reflects Frank's (2014) argument that employer-sponsored migration shifts disciplinary power from the state to employers, creating a climate of self-surveillance in which even highly HSIs face vulnerabilities akin to precarious labor (Frödin & Kjellberg, 2018). However, the six-month probation permit introduces an even more precarious and high-stakes scenario than the framework Frank critiqued. As Interviewee 2 recalled: "It was stressful because we didn't know what would happen after those six months. I had to constantly prove I was worthy." Despite fulfilling their professional duties, migrants in these situations saw their legal status rendered entirely contingent on employer decisions, eliminating even the minimal buffer that previously allowed time to secure new employment.

Yet even for those who were eligible for the three-month job-seeking period, the safeguard often failed in practice. Interviewees described it as an unrealistic and anxiety-inducing deadline that placed immense pressure on job searching, making them avoid "quitting the job" (Interviewee 17). Interviewee 13 called it "stressful," Interviewee 17 "limiting," Interviewee 15 "unrealistic," and Interviewee 3 "unfair." Interviewee 8, who came closest to facing the deadline, remembered: "When my previous company told me they couldn't sponsor [my next visa], I had very little time. I applied everywhere, but most companies take weeks just to respond. There were times I thought about accepting any job just to get a visa."

Additionally, many interviewees deliberately avoided startups or fast-paced environments that, despite offering growth and higher pay, were seen as legally unpredictable. Instead, they gravitated toward large, established firms perceived as *safe*. As Interviewee 6 explained: "If I go to the job market now, I could probably get a higher salary at a startup. But I choose not to leave because this company offers job security. Also, if I don't fit in with the new company's culture, I only have three months to find a job." These choices reveal how legal insecurity reshapes opportunity evaluation, pushing migrants to prioritize stability over alignment with their skills or ambitions.

This pattern is best understood through what Näre and Maury (2024) term *bureaucratic bordering* – the subtle yet powerful ways in which welfare and migration institutions construct invisible barriers for individuals on temporary permits. Rather than providing support or

predictability, the bureaucracy generated layered precarity, where the right to reside, work, and feel secure remained constantly contingent. For HSIs, integration was imagined as seamless but experienced as conditional, fragmented, and psychologically exhausting. Within this climate, HSIs prioritized permanent residence to remain legally secure. This finding resonates with earlier research suggesting that HSIs often prioritize residency stability over rapid career progression, particularly when planning to settle long-term (Tharenou & Kulik, 2020). However, the present study complicates that claim by demonstrating that this emphasis is not simply a personal preference, but a necessary survival strategy shaped by increasingly restrictive migration regimes and systemic constraints – conditions reinforced by the *continuum of deportability* (Sager & Öberg, 2017). Therefore, the initial confidence in Sweden's merit-based system gradually gives way to cautious pragmatism. To safeguard their legal status, many opt to stay with the same employer, delay career moves, or accept roles beneath their qualifications to receive long-term stability.

These dynamics also complicate the assumptions of PCT, which traditionally links job dissatisfaction to responses like exit or neglect (Turnley & Feldman, 2000). For the interviewees, however, such responses were not viable options. As Interviewee 9 explained, "leaving a job could jeopardize [my] legal right to stay." Here, dissatisfaction did not trigger disengagement but instead became something to be carefully managed. In this way, the broader structural forces surrounding migration governance and employer-dependent legal status redefined the very terms of PC violations – extending Sager and Öberg's (2017) logic of conditional belonging from the asylum regime to high-skilled labor migration.

What emerged, then, was a distinct form of *job lock* – one not rooted in personal conservatism or passivity, but in strategic adaptation to systemic constraints. Despite clear dissatisfaction, only a few interviewees had changed jobs over several years, and even those transitions were not voluntary but triggered by employer decisions, such as project terminations. Unlike conventional understandings of job lock – typically linked to non-transferable pensions or healthcare benefits (Berger et al., 2004; Adams, 2008) – this version is shaped by immigration policy, employer-tied permits, and the emotional toll of constrained choice. The result was not merely institutional inertia, but a rationalized caution: the belief that endurance, and compliance were the only viable

paths to long-term security. This systemic lens also invites a reconsideration of dominant explanations for migrant underemployment.

While previous research has emphasized language barriers or the non-recognition of foreign qualifications (Frank, 2014; Zikic & Richardson, 2016; Ressia et al., 2017), this study finds that among highly skilled IT professionals in Sweden, the most significant constraint during the initial four years of residence was not a lack of education or credentials. Rather, it was the structural limitations imposed by work-permit dependency – specifically, the legal requirement to remain with a sponsoring employer and the uncertainty surrounding employers' willingness to extend sponsorship. These conditions severely limited interviewees' ability to seek better job opportunities and perform at their full level of competence. Despite possessing relevant qualifications and professional experience, many found themselves underemployed not due to individual shortcomings, but because legal precarity shaped both their mobility and how employers engaged with them.

4.2.2 The Lingering Effects of Legal Precarity

While the previous section examined how legal dependency restricts HSIs' agency in the labor market, this section turns to an unexpected yet recurring sub-theme that emerged during the interviews: the enduring psychological imprint of legal precarity. For HSIs, obtaining permanent residency does not automatically erase the emotional toll of past vulnerability. Instead, many continue to carry the psychological weight of earlier uncertainties, which subtly but powerfully shapes their career decisions, risk tolerance, and overall sense of stability. Many interviewees reported that even after securing permanent residency, the lingering effects of their precarious immigration status, like emotional exhaustion, career stagnation, or psychological disengagement, continued to shape their career trajectories and overall well-being. This was particularly evident in how interviewees with permanent residence described deferring their career ambitions due to structural barriers and uncertainty about their legal status. Interviewee 6 shared: "I used to plan everything regarding my professional growth, but now – wherever my career will take me, it will take me. That's my mindset right now." Their ambition wasn't abandoned, but postponed – stored for a time when they could pursue it without the constant

threat of legal or employment insecurity (Steele, 1988; Judge & Bono, 2001). This aligns with Kuehn and Corrigan's (2013) concept of *hope labor*, where migrants endure suboptimal conditions, holding onto the belief that these sacrifices will eventually result in future rewards.

Though legal status may shift, as mentioned earlier, the emotional and psychological consequences of hope labor often endure. Interviewee 1 illustrates this shift: "I feel like I wanted too much from my career before. Everything happening in the last four years changed me as a person." Even with legal security in place, the emotional toll of those years remained, leading Interviewee 1 to express: "I just want some peace of mind." This reveals a psychological withdrawal from prior career aspirations – shaped by years of enduring hope labor – where emotional stability now outweighs the pursuit of professional ambition. Migrants carry the unresolved tension of past precarity into later stages of their careers and changing legal statuses, shaping a defensive orientation toward change and reinforcing risk-averse strategies even in contexts of relative stability.

Rather than seeking new career opportunities or advancing, many interviewees chose to remain in their current roles, valuing the emotional stability and predictability that staying put offers. Interviewee 3 explained: "I planned everything for the document and worked so hard… now I just want to breathe and not worry about the stress of changing jobs." This reflects a temporary delay in exit – no longer driven by legal barriers, but by emotional fragility and a lingering fear of instability rooted in their past precarity. While the EVLN framework categorizes responses like exit as discrete behavioral strategies (Rusbult et al., 1988), this delayed exit falls into a conceptual grey zone – not a full departure, but a hesitation shaped by psychological fatigue and a reevaluation of risk. It reflects a quiet recalibration of priorities, where the goal is no longer advancement, but a sustainable sense of control.

For some, however, this *delayed exit* takes the form of *neglect* – remaining in their roles while psychologically disengaging from work. Instead of striving for growth or advancement, they focus on doing just enough to retain employment, conserving energy in the face of emotional exhaustion. Interviewee 1 described this shift: "I am not going to lose this job as long as I put in a bit of effort, and I want to enjoy that right now and not worry." This mirrors what Rusbult et al.

(1988) identify as the *neglect* response within the EVLN framework – passively allowing conditions to deteriorate due to a perceived lack of better alternatives. Yet in this context, neglect emerges not from apathy, but as an emotionally rational strategy – a quiet effort to maintain internal equilibrium after years of coping with instability. It reflects a recalibration of priorities, where the goal is no longer advancement, but recovery.

Yet not all responses to past precarity manifest solely as withdrawal. For some, the transition to permanent residency enables a different kind of shift: the emergence of *voice*. While migrants may continue to limit their work effort, they no longer suppress what they feel. In fact, emotional and cognitive engagement often re-emerge in the form of voiced dissatisfaction, now made possible by the absence of legal fear. As Interviewee 6 put it: "But after I got my permanent status, I felt kind of relieved, like I was free. I could communicate my ideas however I wanted – not in a bad way – but I felt I could express my opinions and object to anything I wanted." Voice arises not because dissatisfaction is new, but because the silencing effects of dependency have finally lifted (Hoffman, 2010). Still, despite this growing willingness to speak, many migrants choose to remain in their current roles. This ambivalence – where voice emerges but exit remains constrained – signals not just a shift in behavior, but a deeper recalibration shaped by the long shadow of legal precarity. Voice, in this context, is cautious and strategic: an expression of discontent shaped by years of self-censorship and institutional dependence. Even when legal security has been achieved, the psychological logic of survival persists, limiting the readiness to act on that voice through change.

This section reveals that the effects of legal dependency do not simply vanish once residency is secured. Instead, the prolonged period of conditional belonging fundamentally reshapes how migrants relate to risk, ambition, and engagement. Even in the absence of formal constraints, the internalized logic of survival continues to guide professional behavior. In contrast to earlier themes of resignation or organizational influences, this section reveals a more introspective trajectory – one where migrants quietly renegotiate what success looks like after prolonged uncertainty.

4.3 Living Legal Dependency: Divergent Organizational Experiences

While legal frameworks and migration policy form the structural scaffolding of migrant precarity, the sections shift focus to the organizational level – the everyday spaces where that precarity is either reinforced or resisted. In contrast to state-level constraints discussed earlier, the sections explore how HSIs' career trajectories are shaped by their lived experiences within Swedish workplaces. This theme unfolds in two parts. Section 4.3.1 analyzes how organizational neglect, role misalignment, and legal dependency interact to erode trust and suppress voice. Section 4.3.2 builds on this by contrasting organizations that reproduce these harms with those that actively buffer their effects.

4.3.1 From Sponsorship to Disillusionment: How Organizational Practices Reshape Migrants' PCs

In this study, interviewees commonly assumed that being sponsored signaled they were valued by their employer and that this would naturally lead to fair treatment and career advancement. Legal residency tied to employer sponsorship thus shaped how migrants interpreted organizational actions: support with visa processes was not seen as a routine administrative task, but as a sign of long-term organizational commitment. This perception fostered the development of relational PCs. Research supports this dynamic: sponsored migrants are more likely to form relational PCs in response to perceived organizational investment (Eisenberger et al., 1986; 2002; Casado & Caspersz, 2016). However, this perception was soon challenged by lived experiences within the workplace.

Many of the interviewees described how organizations used legal sponsorship not as a platform for growth but as leverage. Interviewee 14 reflected: "If there's a layoff or something happens, migrants are often the first ones to be targeted. It's not the locals, that's the reality you feel. You can never fully rely on the process until you have a permanent residence permit, at the very least." Others, like Interviewee 6, recalled how a friend was offered a reduced salary under the guise of a "local contract," despite visa control clearly influencing the terms. Interviewee 18, despite holding a master's from a top Swedish university, was not even consulted during salary

discussions: “They just said they raised my salary to meet Migration Agency requirements.” Despite being highly educated and professionally qualified, the interviewee’s employer treated the legally mandated salary threshold for work-permits not as a baseline, but as a ceiling – effectively precluding further negotiation. This behavior reveals how legal frameworks can be strategically manipulated to suppress bargaining power – aligning with earlier findings on constrained migrant agency in employer-driven recruitment systems (Cerna, 2009; Emilsson, 2014). This dynamic is particularly revealing given that the Migration Agency requires only 80% of the national median salary to issue a work-permit (Swedish Migration Agency, n.d. -a). Yet meeting this modest requirement was often framed by employers not as a legal obligation, but as a gesture of generosity.

These experiences challenge dominant assumptions in the literature on HSIs, which often portray employer-sponsored migrants in the so-called *primary sector* – those with in-demand and highly specialized skills – as enjoying greater leverage, higher salaries, and mobility (Anderson, 2010; Dauvergne & Marsden, 2013). This study shows that HSIs in Sweden’s IT sector are not exempt from the forms of vulnerability typically associated with lower-skilled roles. While such privileges may exist on paper, the lived realities of many interviewees reveal persistent constraints shaped by legal dependency and organizational dynamics. These findings are echoed in emerging scholarship. In reality, HSIs in Sweden’s IT sector often face vulnerabilities resembling those typically associated with lower-skilled roles. Studies by Krifors (2017), Xiang (2007), and Risberg and Romani (2021) confirm this pattern – highlighting underpayment, role stagnation, and organizational exclusion despite high levels of qualification.

Research by Axelsson (2017) further complicates the distinction between high- and low-skilled migrant trajectories. Her study of IT consultants in Sweden reveals that even highly qualified professionals experience chronic uncertainty due to their reliance on employer-sponsored work-permits. Axelsson shows that the boundary between skilled and unskilled vulnerability is not fixed, but fluid – shaped by migration regimes where legal status is contingent on continuous employment. In such systems, even well-qualified migrants encounter *temporally thick borders*, such as prolonged waiting periods for residency, which constrain career planning and inhibit resistance to poor working conditions.

This vulnerability sometimes began before employment even commenced. Interviewee 2, for example, recounted arriving in Sweden to find their role had been changed without notice, "They hired me for something I am really good at. But when I arrived from Türkiye, they gave me an entirely different role. Imagine leaving your country, your language, coming here, and suddenly being assigned to a job you weren't prepared for."

This disconnect between migrants' professional capabilities and the roles they were assigned also exemplifies what scholars term *brain waste*: the chronic underutilization of migrants' skills, qualifications, and potential (Bauder, 2003; Liversage, 2009). Despite being recruited for their expertise, many interviewees found themselves performing tasks far below their ability level or stuck in roles that offer little scope for development. Interviewee 2 shared: "I have lots of experience in the area they hired me for. I want to use that knowledge in my current job, but I can't right now."

This underutilization not only stalled career growth but represented a missed opportunity for employers. As Halvarsson (2024) notes, Swedish companies see significant productivity gains from international recruitment – provided that talent is effectively utilized. When this does not happen due to exclusionary practices or a lack of advancement opportunities, both migrants and employers lose out (Andersson Joona et al., 2014; Irastorza & Bevelander, 2021). This is particularly relevant in contexts like Sweden, where employers often invest considerable resources into recruiting HSIs to fill labor shortages in sectors such as IT (Frank, 2018; Osanami Törngren & Holbrow, 2016).

The misalignment between professional identity and workplace treatment was reflected in how interviewees' competence was routinely questioned or overlooked, despite strong performance and qualifications. As Interviewee 6 explained:

> Even if I perform 100% better… There are still people who don't fully trust me or acknowledge my contributions. My work gets questioned while others' mistakes are overlooked.

Others described similar dynamics. Interviewee 17, for instance, was excluded from key tasks while a less experienced Swedish colleague was included without hesitation. Such differential

treatment was frequently attributed to migrant status, with interviewees pointing to subtle but consistent cues – tone, scrutiny, and recognition – that signaled underlying bias. These patterns reflect broader research on microaggressions and implicit bias, which shows that migrants are often held to higher standards and must repeatedly prove themselves before receiving equal recognition (Turchick Hakak et al., 2010).

Over time, everyday experiences of exclusion led to growing disillusionment, as hopes for mutual growth and commitment faded with the realization that employer sponsorship was driven more by legal and labor market needs than by genuine investment in their development. As these insights emerged, interviewees increasingly viewed their inclusion as conditional and instrumental – valued for their productivity rather than seen as full members of the organization or society, a perception reinforced by public discourse in Sweden (Groglopo et al., 2023).

“I was looking for new opportunities, however I might stay put, at least until I get my Permanent Residence,” explained Interviewee 2 – capturing a broader shift from organizational loyalty to strategic patience. For many, visa-tied employment created chronic job insecurity – not just fear of job loss, but the existential risk of losing legal residency. This burden was deepened by organizational failures: limited recognition, exclusion from decision-making, and lack of developmental support intensified the sense of job lock. Trapped in roles misaligned with their skills and aspirations, many migrants adopted a more transactional mindset – enduring constrained conditions in exchange for legal security (Piccoli & De Witte, 2015; Shoss et al., 2017).

While O’Donohue et al. (2014) suggest that individuals with transactional contracts tend toward exit or neglect, the findings here complicate that binary. Although interviewees’ PCs often shifted from relational to transactional as unmet expectations accumulated, their behavioral responses did not align neatly with either the PC patterns described by O’Donohue et al. (2014). This reveals a critical tension: the type of PC does not always predict behavior when legal and institutional structures override individual agency. In this context, it is primarily legal precarity – specifically the fear of losing residency status – that constrains behavioral responses such as exit, voice, and neglect. At the same time, both legal structures and everyday organizational practices

shape the evolving content of the PC itself. When advancement is limited, roles are mismatched, skills go unrecognized, while structural barriers persist, the contract shifts from relational to transactional – even if the behavioral response remains constrained. In this way, legal dependency and organizational dynamics interact not only to redefine the contract but also to delimit the space of possible action for HSIs. The constant need to prove oneself, the normalization of under recognition, and the lack of bargaining power collectively reinforce *structurally sustained dissonance* – a state in which migrants are forced to continuously recalibrate their expectations – yet receive little in return to justify or relieve those adjustments.

While some interviewees managed internal tensions through reframing strategies aimed at internal coherence (Festinger, 1957; Aronson, 1969; Steele, 1988), others encountered more persistent social dissonance – particularly around language and informal inclusion. Despite operating in officially international environments, several interviewees described how language barriers subtly shaped their workplace experiences, fostering exclusion. Interviewee 8 recalled:

> There were times when I felt professionally discriminated against because I didn't know the language. In my first job, I often sat alone during lunch. There was a clear divide – one large group of Swedes and another of migrants who had settled here. Lunch with other immigrants was nice – we talked and connected. But if I went down when [the Swedes] were there, they spoke in Swedish even if I joined, so I'd often end up alone.

This reflected more than a linguistic hurdle – it revealed a deeper lack of genuine inclusion. Exclusion was further reinforced by informal norms: while English was the working language, Swedish often dominated casual settings like coffee breaks or after-work events, subtly signaling who truly belonged. This gap between formal internationalism and informal social boundaries created a dissonant experience for migrants who saw themselves as socially capable and eager to engage. As Aronson (1969) notes, dissonance intensifies when it clashes with one's self-image. For many, being excluded despite seeing themselves as open and competent led to a painful misalignment between self-perception and social reality.

In response, interviewees adopted internal coping strategies to manage this dissonance. Interviewee 17 described their ill-fitting role as "an opportunity to learn something new" – a

reinterpretation that aligns with Steele's (1988) theory of self-concept protection. Rather than challenge the breach, migrants reframed the experience to preserve self-worth and emotional stability.

Such adaptations were not isolated but widespread. With limited avenues for redress, many internalized the burden of adjustment, normalizing exclusion as a personal shortcoming rather than a systemic failure. This signals a broader transformation in the PC: when renegotiation is unfeasible, the responsibility for adaptation is displaced onto the individual. Over time, this dynamic erodes both agency and ambition, leading to emotional fatigue and masking deeper structural shortcomings in how global talent is engaged and supported.

4.3.2 Thriving Within Constraints: How Inclusive Organizations Buffer Legal Precarity

While many interviewees had experienced organizational neglect and exclusion in past roles, this section focuses on those who encountered a different reality – one where workplace culture and leadership helped buffer the emotional toll of legal dependency. The emphasis here is not on structural constraint, but on organizational possibility: how inclusion, trust, and recognition can reshape migrant experiences even when legal precarity remains unchanged.

Interviewee 8's story illustrates this shift most clearly. After facing "isolation and stress" in a previous role, they described a transformative experience in their current organization:

> Managers, I think, need to first make you feel they're approachable. In my current company, they have a beautiful monthly initiative – our manager sends out a newsletter appreciating everyone's work and updating us about the company. We even talk about personal life outside work. It's not like you're scared or that there's no hierarchy.

Their legal status had not changed – but the way they experienced that status had. Through approachable leadership, visible appreciation, and open communication, the emotional weight of sponsorship was significantly eased. What had once felt like a climate of anxiety and distance was replaced by a sense of belonging and recognition. This transformation did not result from changes in immigration law, but from the organization's deliberate efforts to humanize workplace relationships and cultivate a culture of support. *Loyalty*, in this context, was no longer

anchored only in fear of losing legal status, but also in genuine engagement and mutual respect. Rather than being driven solely by legal dependency or ethnic affinity, the loyalty described here was grounded in interpersonal trust and emotional connection. As Morgan and Finniear (2009) suggest, migrants often form strong attachments to organizations not because of structural necessity, but because they feel recognized, included, and valued as part of a community. In such environments, inclusion becomes a lived, relational experience – emerging through shared values, mutual respect, and the fabric of everyday interaction. By recognizing migrants not merely for their legal function but for their full presence, these organizations turned sponsorship from a mechanism of control into a place for trust and inclusion. Interviewee 4 shared a similarly affirming experience:

> My manager trusts me, I get good opportunities, and they've supported every permit application. I don't think about PR so much – I'm just happy here. I always worry that if I weren't with this company, things would be absolutely horrible.

Although concerns about legal precarity lingered in the background, Interviewee 4's account reflected a relational PC sustained through transparency, trust, and consistent organizational support. Their organization actively involved employees in decision-making, fostered cross-team knowledge-sharing, and encouraged peer-level relationships – all of which cultivated a sense of belonging beyond formal policy or demographic representation. Research shows that HSIs are most successfully socialized when informal support – such as empathic supervision and team engagement – is consistently present, especially in the adaptation phase of employment (Hoppe et al., 2017; van Riemsdijk et al., 2016). In line with this, Interviewee 4's experience suggests that inclusive climates and everyday interpersonal trust can mitigate the emotional toll of legal dependency.

This aligns with Ferdman and Deane's (2014) definition of inclusion as more than representational diversity – it is the ability to contribute meaningfully while feeling respected and psychologically safe. Brimhall et al. (2017) further emphasize the role of leader–member relationships in retaining minority employees and enabling them to thrive. In both cases, it was not policy but practice – the tone set by leadership and the norms within teams – that shaped the experience of legal precarity. Such environments resemble what Li et al. (2019) call an *inclusive*

climate – where differences are valued, resources are accessible, and diverse employees are supported through both formal structures and informal networks. These climates not only facilitate socialization but also shape how migrants' proactivity is received and reinforced (Wanberg & Choi, 2012).

In several interviews, informal spaces emerged as particularly important. After-work gatherings, casual team lunches, and shared routines were seen not only as social activities, but as critical spaces of integration and visibility. As Interviewee 5 explained: "After-work gatherings are important. That's where trust builds in the team, and these activities help us to meet others, learn about the host country's culture and so on… It is especially important in Sweden, where winters are dark, and lonely. These activities are not just about work, it's about feeling part of something."

In inclusive organizations, these informal moments became opportunities for bonding, emotional support, and cultural exchange – demonstrating that integration depends on mutual accommodation, where both migrants and host organizations must actively engage in the process (Berry, 1997). These spaces enabled migrants not only to learn about Swedish norms, but also to feel more emotionally connected to their peers. In less inclusive settings, however, the absence of such interactions – whether due to social cliques, language barriers, or a lack of initiative – reinforced a sense of separation and invisibility. Notably, these outcomes did not correlate with job titles, salaries, or company size, but with the relational fabric of everyday organizational life. The extent to which migrants felt welcomed and included hinged on how colleagues and managers extended – or withheld – social cues of belonging.

Taken together, these examples reveal that structural constraints alone do not determine migrant experience – they are filtered through the cultures and practices of individual organizations. Leadership that prioritizes transparency, appreciation, and relational support can actively counterbalance the disempowering aspects of sponsorship. In such environments, migrants were not only more likely to stay, but also to thrive – contributing beyond the minimum required and envisioning a future of professional growth rather than just legal survival.

5. Conclusion

This thesis examined how Sweden's employer-tied work permit system affects the career trajectories, workplace experiences, and emotional wellbeing of HSIs in the IT sector. Drawing on in-depth interviews, the study highlights how shifting legal frameworks and opaque bureaucratic processes disrupt the PC formed by migrants, not only with employers, but also with the Swedish state. Many interviewees entered Sweden with expectations of stability and meritocratic progression, only to face policy reversals and prolonged uncertainty. This mismatch gave rise to what we term structurally sustained dissonance, an enduring psychological tension shaped by constrained agency and legal precarity.

The findings extend Psychological Contract Theory by illustrating how national legal structures – especially those that condition residency on employer sponsorship – shape the formation, breach, and emotional impact of PCs. Furthermore, CDT is reconceptualized here as a long-term, adaptive strategy in contexts of constrained behavioral choice, where agency is filtered through institutional gatekeeping. By integrating the EVLN framework, the study shows how traditional responses to dissatisfaction are reshaped under legal constraint: exit is often too risky, voice too dangerous, and neglect becomes an intentional strategy of emotional preservation.

In doing so, this thesis contributes to existing literature by emphasizing the intersection between immigration law and organizational behavior. Unlike earlier studies that examine these domains in isolation, this research demonstrates how workplace dynamics and migration policy co-construct migrant experiences. Building on Frank (2018), who critiques employer-centric migration regimes, this study adds a psychological and relational dimension, showing how perceptions of trust and fairness are fractured when migrants are treated as conditionally included actors.

The findings carry important implications. For employers, inclusive leadership, transparent communication, and supportive HR practices are critical for mitigating the emotional burden of legal dependency. Organizational silence or ambiguity may deepen job lock and contribute to brain waste, as migrants delay career moves to avoid risking their legal standing. For

policymakers, the results point to the need for consistent, transparent, and forward-looking migration frameworks. The effectiveness of talent retention strategies relies not only on attracting HSIs but also on ensuring legal clarity and honoring the expectations under which migrants commit to stay.

This study is not without limitations. The use of purposive and snowball sampling may have introduced some selection bias, favoring participants who are more socially connected or critical of the system. While recruitment was initiated from multiple networks to enhance diversity, future studies could benefit from broader sampling strategies or longitudinal designs. Additionally, as all interviews were conducted in English, language may have shaped the depth or nuance of certain narratives.

Ultimately, this research shows that migration policy is not just an administrative or economic concern, it is a psychological and relational force that shapes how individuals imagine and pursue their futures. When legal systems and organizational practices operate in harmony, they enable migrants to not only remain, but to grow, contribute, and thrive. When they do not, the consequences extend beyond the workplace – affecting ambition, identity, and belonging.

6. Directions for Further Research

While this thesis explores how employer-tied work-permits and legal dependency intertwines with organizational commitment to shape long-term career decisions and emotional well-being of HSIs, future research could adopt a longitudinal approach to assess whether the effects of PC breaches and job lock persist after migrants obtain permanent residency and citizenship. Cross-national comparisons could examine how different migration regimes influence these dynamics. Incorporating intersectional lenses – considering race, gender, or family status – could also uncover layered vulnerabilities or resilience pathways.

Further research in management studies should explore how organizations perceive and respond to migrant legal dependency, what HR strategies might mitigate job lock and brain waste, and how inclusion practices can be tailored to support legally vulnerable talent.

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Appendix

Appendix A: Interview Guide

Interview Guide

Section A: Initial Arrival & First Permit

Background & Personal Context

1. Could you walk us through your career journey – where you started, how you moved to Sweden, and the kind of work you do now?
2. How long have you been living and working in Sweden?

First Job & Work Permit Acquisition

3. How did you experience the process of obtaining your first work-permit? What kind of support (if any) did your employer provide?
    a. Did you feel well-supported, or were there things that could have been improved?
4. Before moving to Sweden, what were your expectations about working here – such as career opportunities, work culture, and job stability?
    a. Did you have any expectations regarding work-permits or residency requirements, and how does your actual experience compare?

Section B: Career Trajectory & Current Role

Career Progression

5. Could you walk me through your career journey in Sweden – starting from your first job to your current position? How has your role evolved over time?

a. If you have changed jobs, could you share the reasons for leaving your previous position(s) and what factors were most influential in those decisions?

Legal Constraints & Changing Jobs

6. What type of work-permit or residency status did you have when you first started, and how has this changed over time?
7. What are the biggest challenges non-EU professionals face when changing jobs in Sweden?

Extended Stays & Unfavorable Conditions

8. Have you ever stayed in a job longer than you wanted due to work-permit restrictions? If so, how did that affect your professional growth?
9. Some non-EU professionals 'downshift' or take roles below their skill level until they secure permanent residence. Have you experienced this? If so, how did it affect your sense of career fulfillment?

Bargaining Power & Job Security

10. How do visa restrictions impact your bargaining power when negotiating salary or working conditions?
11. In Sweden, as a temporary visa holder you have to find a new job within three months if you lose your current one. How does/did that rule affect your career decisions, sense of security, and long-term planning?
12. The IT industry is evolving rapidly, often requiring professionals to be up-to-date on technological changes taking place in the market. How do visa constraints affect your ability to navigate these changes and your sense of job security?

Section C: Workplace Belonging & Psychological Contract

Defining Belonging

13. What does "belonging" mean to you in a professional setting?
    i. *Side note (Interviewer): After they respond, you can introduce your working definition of belonging (e.g., feeling accepted, valued, and included), to ensure clarity.*
14. How would you describe the social atmosphere at work? Do you feel like you can connect with colleagues beyond work tasks?
    a. In your experience, what role do managers play in fostering social integration within the workplace?
15. How has your sense of belonging changed over time, especially as your legal status evolved (e.g., from a temporary/tied work-permit to permanent residency)?
16. Have you ever felt treated differently – intentionally or unintentionally – because of your migrant status? How did that experience affect your sense of belonging at work?

Career Decisions Influenced by Visa Uncertainty

17. Could you describe a time when legal constraints – such as work-permits or visa restrictions – shaped your career decisions in Sweden?
    a. How did that situation affect your motivation, job satisfaction, or sense of belonging in the workplace?

Fairness & Discrimination

18. How do you perceive your job security, given that your work-permit might influence your ability to stay in Sweden? In what ways, if any, do these factors affect your sense of stability or well-being at work?

Perceived Recognition & Contribution

19. Recently, Sweden has discussed extending permanent residency to 8 years and adding new requirements for citizenship.

    How do you think these discussions and policy changes might impact how migrant workers are treated or perceived in the workplace and in Sweden? Do you feel they could affect your sense of belonging, and if so, how?

Section D: Employer Support & Inclusion

Beyond Legal Compliance

20. What steps – if any – does/did your employer take to support foreign employees beyond helping with legal paperwork (e.g., professional development, mentorship, networking)?
    a. What kind of support would have helped you navigate work-permit uncertainty – not just during the application process, but also in managing its impact on your daily work life?
21. In what ways have you noticed any differences in career growth opportunities between local and migrant employees in your organization?
22. What kind of support would have been most helpful when dealing with work-permit uncertainty – not just in the process of obtaining it, but also in managing the daily challenges and uncertainties that come with a tied-work visa?

Section E: Policy & Systemic Impact

23. What changes would you like to see in Swedish immigration laws or workplace policies to improve the experiences of migrant IT professionals?
24. How advantageous is it being in the IT sector when it comes to securing your work-permits? And why?

Future Outlook

25. Considering everything we've discussed, what are the main factors influencing whether you might stay in or leave Sweden?
    a. What would make you more likely to stay in Sweden long-term? And what circumstances might push you to leave?
26. How do you see your career evolving in Sweden over the long term?
27. Finally, if you could give one piece of advice to a non-EU professional considering a move to Sweden for work, what would it be?
    a. What is one key thing you wish you had known before moving to Sweden for work?
28. If you could change anything about your company or migration policies to improve the experience of migrant workers, what would it be and why?

Appendix B: Information on Interviewees

Pseudonym	Country of Origin	Qualification	Current Job	Time in Sweden	Permit Status	Total Work Experience
Interviewee 1	Azerbaijan	Master Degree from Sweden	Senior Software Engineer	6 years 10 months	Permanent Resident	9 years
Interviewee 2	Türkiye	Bachelor Degree from Türkiye	Cyber Security Engineer	2 years 6 months	Work-Permit – Tied to Employer and Position	11 years
Interviewee 3	India	Bachelor Degree from India	Quality Assurance Automatio n Engineer	5 years 10 months	Permanent Resident	12 years
Interviewee 4	Türkiye	Bachelor Degree from Türkiye	Senior Software Engineer	4 years 1 month	Work-Permit – Tied to position	15 years
Interviewee 5	India	Bachelor Degree from India	Test Lead	7 years 1 month	Citizen	15 years
Interviewee 6	India	Master Degree from India	Solutions Architect	6 years 9 months	Permanent Resident	15 years
Interviewee 7	India	Bachelor Degree from	QA Automatio	5 years	Work-Permit – Tied to position	9 years

Pseudonym	Country of Origin	Qualification	Current Job	Time in Sweden	Permit Status	Total Work Experience
		India	n Engineer			
Interviewee 8	India	Master Degree from Sweden	Technical Engineer	5 years 8 months	Work-Permit – Tied to Employer and Position	3 years
Interviewee 9	Türkiye	Bachelor Degree from Türkiye	Database Developer	2 years 9 months	Work-Permit – Tied to position	19 years
Interviewee 10	Türkiye	Bachelor Degree from Türkiye	iOS Developer	2 years 6 months	Work-Permit – Tied to position	10 years
Interviewee 11	Azerbaijan	Master Degree from Finland	IT Consultant	1 year	Work-Permit – Tied to Employer and Position	4 years
Interviewee 12	India	Master Degree from Sweden	Junior Machine Learning Engineer	2 years 8 months	Work-Permit – Tied to position	3 years
Interviewee 13	India	Bachelor Degree from India	Software Engineer	5 years 7 months	Work-Permit – Tied to position	15 years
Interviewee 14	Azerbaijan	Master Degree	IT	5 years	Work-Permit –	4 years

Pseudonym	Country of Origin	Qualification	Current Job	Time in Sweden	Permit Status	Total Work Experience
		from Sweden	Consultant		Tied to position	
Interviewee 15	India	Bachelor Degree in India	Senior Security Specialist	4 years 4 months	Permanent Residence	25 years
Interviewee 16	India	Master Degree in India	Software Engineer	5 years 3 months	Permanent Residence	10 years
Interviewee 17	Türkiye	Bachelor Degree in Türkiye	IT Consultant	3 years 2 months	Work-Permit – Tied to position	7 years
Interviewee 18	Azerbaijan	Master Degree in Sweden	Software Engineer	2 years 5 months	Work-Permit – Tied to position	3 years
Interviewee 19	Türkiye	Bachelor Degree in Türkiye	Developer	1 year 6 months	Work-Permit – Tied to Employer and Position	8 years
Interviewee 20	India	Master Degree in India	Software Engineer	3 years 8 months	Work-Permit – Tied to Position	7 years

Appendix C: Thematic Analysis

Theme	Codes
The Psychological Contract from Formation to Breach	Perceived Meritocracy and Economic Opportunity in Sweden
	Skills-based employment expectations challenged by structural barriers
	Hidden hiring hierarchies and visa reluctance by companies
	Accessible Citizenship Enabling Long-Term Planning
	Investment of time and effort amplifying expectations of security and fairness
	Retroactive Policy Changes Eroding Trust
Legal Dependency and Job Lock	Perception of being stuck in roles that no longer align with skills or ambitions
	Work-permit dependency creating employment inertia
	Career stagnation due to work-permit

Theme	Codes
	restrictions
	Visa bureaucracy discouraging career advancement
	Three-month job-seeking rule heightening legal and career risk
	Shifting goals due to limited opportunities or legal constraints
	Emotional strain, postponed ambition, emotional exhaustion.
Divergent Organizational Responses to Legal Dependency	Employer Power and Legal Dependency
	Organizational Breaches and Role Misalignment
	Skill underutilization and brain waste
	Strategic silence
	Supportive leadership buffering legal precarity

Theme	Codes
	Cognitive reframing as a coping mechanism
	Organizational neglect and emotional toll
	Language and cultural exclusion

Appendix D: Consent Form

Consent Form

Information to participants about participation in a student Master project

About the project

The aim of the Master thesis project "Exploring the Impact of Legal Status on the Sense of Belonging in the Workplace Among Migrant IT Professionals in Sweden" (preliminary title) is to understand the experiences of international IT-professionals working in Sweden. By exploring the perspective of the participants, the study can present a new angle on the work of international teams in Sweden.

The thesis is written within the Master Program in Business and Management at Stockholm School of Economics. The study is conducted independently by students Gulzar Aghalarova-Ibrahimli and Lakshmi Madhumita Gullapalli, under the supervision of Sarah Philipson Isaac. Please see contact info below. For information about ethical information for participants please see below.

Data Collection

The data collection consists of qualitative interviews that are recorded with the permission of the participant.

Voluntary participation and non-disclosure

Participation is voluntary and confidential. Participants can choose to cancel their participation at any time and have a right to withdraw from the study should they wish without any further explanations. Unauthorized individuals will not have access to the material and participants involved in the project are covered by professional secrecy.

Personal data

If agreed upon, the interview will be recorded, with consent from participants, in order to remember the content in detail. Later the recording will be transcribed. Personal names are not registered, and participants will be given a pseudonym when interviews are transcribed and analyzed. This also applies to organizations that wish to be given a pseudonym. Participants decide when it is suitable to meet (potentially online), and participation takes place on research participants' terms.

Handling of collected material

Material such as recordings and notes are kept locked away on password protected computers

and are only available to authorised persons. In the final thesis, extracts from interviews may be cited and interviewees are given a pseudonym. The collected material will be used for the master thesis under the conditions described herein and may be published electronically by Stockholm School of Economics. Interview recordings once transcribed will be erased after the conclusion of the project.

Results and publication

The Master thesis is planned to be submitted to Stockholm School of Economics on 13.05.2025 and will be published in the school library portal at a later date. The thesis will be written in English.

For questions and further information

You are more than welcome to contact us whenever you have any questions or concerns.

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Informed consent to participate in the study

I have read and fully understood the scope and implications of participating in this student MA project. Any questions I had were answered satisfactorily.

☐ I agree to participate, and that the interview can be digitally recorded.

☐ I agree to my personal details being handled as described above.

Place and date

Name and Signature
(participant)

Appendix E: Use of AI

For the purpose of transcribing the interviews, we utilized Microsoft Teams' Live Transcription feature for the initial draft of the interview transcripts, significantly speeding up the transcription process. However, it produced errors and inconsistencies, making it necessary for the researchers to manually refine the transcripts to ensure the accuracy and reliability of the data.

In addition to transcription tools, ChatGPT was used primarily to enhance grammatical accuracy, improve the clarity of written text, and assist in locating a few relevant research papers during the early stages of the study – functioning similarly to a search tool like Google Scholar, though to a limited extent. However, the use of AI tools revealed notable limitations, including the suggestion of irrelevant sources and occasional grammatical inaccuracies. As a result, all AI-assisted outputs were rigorously reviewed and cross-checked by the researchers to ensure academic rigor, relevance, and reliability. These tools were used strictly as supportive resources; all critical aspects of the research design, analysis, and writing were carried out independently by the researchers.

Therefore, AI tools were most useful for polishing text, improving readability, and occasionally providing inspiration for section headings. While they were also used to reduce word count, this required careful oversight, as important context was sometimes lost. Consequently, their role in editing was limited to surface-level refinement rather than substantive content reduction. These tools were used strictly as supportive resources; all critical aspects of the research design and analysis were carried out independently by the researchers.