

THESIS FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

People-positive organizing

Proposing an alternative perspective on “new organizational forms”

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Abstract

Given the ubiquity and power of current-day organizations, innovating how we organize collective effort—developing “new organizational forms”—is a key lever for addressing society’s greatest challenges. Drawing interest from practitioners and researchers alike, the discourse about “new organizational forms” is marked by heated debates between proponents and critics. Proponents regard stories of new form “pioneers” like W.L. Gore, Buurtzorg, and Morning Star as illustrative of the superiority of “less-hierarchical”, “self-managing”, and “agile” organizing in today’s age. Critics, however, question the newness and benefits of these forms, pointing to coordination issues in new form experiments and the persistence of traditional bureaucratic rules and hierarchical structures in most contemporary organizations.

This thesis aims to propose an alternative perspective for understanding “new organizational forms” in more nuanced, imaginative, and practically relevant ways. This aim is addressed through three studies: (a) a deep case study of Zenseact, a Swedish software company designed to be “less-hierarchical”, “self-managing”, and “agile”; (b) a literature review on “new organizational forms”; and (c) a study of the practitioner discourse about new forms.

This thesis contributes by advancing a “people-positive” perspective on organizing. People-positive organizing is grounded in assumptions about human beings—a *Menschenbild*—that views humans as inherently social, capable, and trustworthy beings rather than as boundedly rational self-interest maximizers. Accordingly, *people-positive organizing* is about people doing things together to achieve common goals based on the shared assumption that they can trust each other to solve problems locally through collaboration. As argued in this thesis, a people-positive perspective reveals often-overlooked differences among “(new) organizational forms” in their assumptions, purposes, principles, and practices, and nuances differences in structural features that are often overstated. Relatedly, this thesis opens avenues for coordinating and conceptualizing “new organizational forms” differently. It offers a conceptual language to examine, imagine, and design new forms not so much in terms of the structural features they are moving *away* from—think *less-hierarchical*, *self-managing*, *de-centralized*—but rather in terms of the *Menschenbild*, *sensemaking devices*, and *situated* purposes, principles, and practices they are moving *towards*.

Keywords: Organizational form; new organizational form; new form of organizing; hierarchy; self-management; agile; organization design; sensemaking devices

List of appended papers

This thesis is based on the work contained in the following papers, referred to by Roman numerals in the text:

Paper I

Bremer, C. (2025). New organizational forms: Deconstructing and reconfiguring the literature.

Manuscript resubmitted after revision for second round of review in European Management Review. A previous version was presented at the 40th European Group for Organizational Studies (EGOS) Colloquium, July 4–6, 2024, Milan, Italy. Another version was presented at the 85th Annual Meeting of the Academy of Management (AOM), July 25–29, 2025, Copenhagen, Denmark.

Paper II

Bremer, C., Rylander Eklund, A., & Elmquist, M. (2025). Making sense in “less-hierarchical” forms of organizing. *Scandinavian Journal of Management*, 41(2), 101398. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scaman.2025.101398>.

The fieldwork was done by both the first and third author. The first author did the initial analysis and contributed the initial conceptual idea. The writing process, further analysis, and conceptualization were shared between the three authors, with the first author taking a lead role.

Paper III

Bremer, C., Rylander Eklund, A., & Elmquist, M. (2025). Scaling or growing agile? Proposing a manifesto for agile organization development. *Journal of Organization Design*, 14(1), 23–34. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41469-024-00179-9>.

The first author contributed the initial conceptual idea. The further conceptualization, analysis, and writing were shared between the three authors, with the first author taking a lead role.

Paper IV

Rylander Eklund, A., Bremer, C., & Elmquist, M. (2022). A philosophy for new ways of working: Insights from Mary Parker Follett.

Manuscript under development for journal submission. This version was presented at the 13th International Process Symposium (PROS), June 25–28, 2022, Rhodes, Greece.

The first author contributed the conceptual idea. The further conceptualization, analysis, and writing were shared between the three authors, with the first author taking a lead role on the overall development of the manuscript, and the second author taking a lead role on parts of the theoretical background and the findings section.

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Constantin Bremer

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1. Introduction

Organizations are everywhere in contemporary society (Barley, 2016; Luhmann, 2000; Mintzberg, 2023). How we organize collective effort—the *organizational form* we adopt—may be the most powerful (social) technology, the most potent locus of innovation to address society’s greatest challenges (Battilana et al., 2022; Bodrožić & Adler, 2022; Davis & Marquis, 2005; Graeber & Wengrow, 2021; Kociatkiewicz & Kostera, 2018; Kornberger, 2022; Puranam, 2024; Walsh et al., 2006).

Historically, our understanding of organization(s) has been shaped by the ideal of the large industrial corporation with its bureaucratic procedures and hierarchical structures (Taylor, 1911; Weber, 1968). In recent decades, the suitability of bureaucracy and managerial hierarchy have been questioned in light of contemporary organizational and societal challenges (Lee & Edmondson, 2017). Relatedly, scholars became fascinated with so-called “new organizational forms” (Daft & Lewin, 1993; Heydebrand, 1989; Puranam et al., 2014)—pioneered by organizations like W.L. Gore, Buurtzorg, and Morning Star¹—and how they might enable organizations to become “less-hierarchical” (Billinger & Workiewicz, 2019), “self-managing” (Lee & Edmondson, 2017), “agile” (Rigby et al., 2016), and more.

Although the extant discourse on such organizations has broadened our view on possibilities and limits of contemporary organization design, scholars have also pointed out some shortcomings. First, conceptual clarity is held back by an elusive use of the “new organizational forms” notion and a broad variety of associated labels (EL Khoury et al., 2024; Foss, 2002; Palmer et al., 2007). What do people actually mean—and *not* mean—when they call an organizational form “less-hierarchical”, “self-managing”, and/or “agile”? Are all these forms *actually* new? How does the next new trend, the next new label, differ from the previous? Heated debates between critics (Foss & Klein, 2022) and proponents of new forms (Hamel & Zanini, 2020) leave little room for *nuanced* arguments.

Second, the new forms discourse seems stuck in extant conceptual language (Cabantous et al., 2016; Daft & Lewin, 1993; Graeber & Wengrow, 2021; Kornberger, 2022). *Post-bureaucratic*, *less-hierarchical*, *self-managing*, *de-centralized*—most of the language used to describe new forms remains tied to the conventional, structuralist understanding of organization(s) and hence largely blinds us from *imagining* alternative, other-than-structural understandings and solutions (Alexander, 2022; Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1993; Child, 2019; Schüßler et al., 2021). Sure, new forms may be moving *away* from bureaucratic procedures and hierarchical structures, but what might they be moving *towards*?

Finally, the promises of new organizational forms have not yet fully materialized in practice, as the continued prevalence of bureaucracy and managerial hierarchy in most organizations illustrates (Diefenbach, 2019; Foss & Klein, 2022; Lee, 2024; Monteiro & Adler, 2022). While promises of “less-hierarchical”, “self-managing”, and/or “agile” organizing may sound appealing to practitioners (Lee & Edmondson, 2017; Madsen, 2020), many organizations venturing into new forms struggle to fulfil and sustain related promises as they fail to successfully *coordinate* collective effort (Bernstein et al., 2016; de Vaujany et al., 2021; Foss

¹ The Appendix offers more detailed descriptions of these organizations and other main inspirations for the NWoW movement.

& Klein, 2022; Jensen & Mikkelsen, 2024; Rigby et al., 2020). Several new form “poster children”—including Oticon, Zappos, and FAVI—have later returned to more hierarchical coordination (Foss & Klein, 2022; Laloux, 2014; Romme, 2015). With coordination of collective effort viewed as the essence of any organizing by several scholars (see e.g., Galbraith, 1974; Jarzabkowski et al., 2012; Joseph & Sengul, 2025; Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967; March & Simon, 1958; Mintzberg, 2023; Okhuysen & Bechky, 2009; Puranam et al., 2014), coordination issues and returns to hierarchical coordination hardly promote the case for “new organizational forms”. Meanwhile, practitioners and consultants put forward their own conceptualizations of new organizational forms and what makes them special (see e.g., Dignan, 2019; Laloux, 2014; Minnaar & de Morree, 2019), further questioning the *practical relevance* of new forms scholarship.

With many scholars referring to the same cases—such as W.L. Gore, Buurtzorg, and Morning Star—yet ever-new labels (EL Khoury et al., 2024; Foss & Klein, 2022), deep empirical studies of “new organizational forms” and how they can be brought to life remain quite rare (Lee & Edmondson, 2017; Walsh et al., 2006). How and under what conditions can practitioners make coordination in new organizational forms work (see also Joseph & Sengul, 2025)? Are we (both as scholars and practitioners) perhaps too quick to discard bureaucracy and managerial hierarchy from our contemporary organizing repertoire (see du Gay, 2000; Foss & Klein, 2022; Monteiro & Adler, 2022)?

Given the current state of the new organizational forms discourse, this PhD thesis aims to propose an alternative perspective for understanding “new organizational forms” in more nuanced, imaginative, and practically relevant ways. Specifically, this thesis is guided by the following overarching research questions:

RQ1: How is collective effort being coordinated in new organizational forms?

In the proclaimed absence of bureaucratic procedures and hierarchical structures, collective effort needs to be coordinated differently—but how? With this question, the intention is to put particular attention onto how coordination can be enabled in “new organizational forms”, while also acknowledging some of the coordination challenges people in new forms commonly encounter. Three prominent labels within the discourse—“less-hierarchical”, “self-managing”, and “agile”—are spotlighted in this investigation.

RQ2: How are new organizational forms conceptualized?

This question focuses on clarifying the meaning of “new organizational forms” as a (theoretical) concept, with the three aforementioned labels again in the spotlight.

Overall, addressing these two research questions will provide the basis—in accordance with the aim of this thesis—to propose an alternative perspective for understanding “new organizational forms” in more nuanced, imaginative, and practically relevant ways.

The remainder of this thesis is structured as follows: Chapter 2 provides a theoretical frame within organization (design) literature, situating the new forms discourse vis-à-vis bureaucracy and managerial hierarchy as “traditional” organizational forms. Next, chapter 3 scrutinizes the new forms discourse, challenging its underlying concept and narrative to articulate the need for an alternative perspective. Chapter 4 describes how the research questions were developed and

investigated during this PhD student journey. Specifically, the three studies which form the basis for this thesis are outlined—an empirical study, a literature review, and a study of the practitioner discourse—before reflecting on said journey and the choices made during it. After that, chapter 5 summarizes the four papers appended to this thesis, explaining how they connect to the studies, to the overarching research questions, and to each other. Next, chapter 6 discusses insights from the papers to address the research questions posed in this thesis. In chapter 7, a *people-positive* perspective on organizing is proposed, including a critical reflection on its tenets and prospects for understanding “new organizational forms” in more nuanced, imaginative, and practically relevant ways. The thesis comes to its conclusion in chapter 8, highlighting its main implications for researchers as well as practitioners and policymakers.

2. Situating the new forms discourse

This chapter situates the new forms discourse, providing a theoretical frame for this thesis. The chapter starts by introducing the phenomenon of “new organizational forms” (section 2.1). After that, in section 2.2 a brief historical description of organization (design) theory is provided, outlining a theoretical baseline for understanding the “traditional” organizational forms—bureaucracy and managerial hierarchy—which the new forms are commonly positioned against. In section 2.3 then, the common narrative of “new organizational forms” as heroic emancipations from the supposedly villainous traditional forms is presented.

2.1. Organizing differently: The phenomenon of “new forms”

The stories of organizations such as W.L. Gore, Buurtzorg, and Morning Star draw interest from scholars and practitioners alike (Hamel & Zanini, 2020; Laloux, 2014; Lee & Edmondson, 2017). Among practitioners, these stories inspire a movement of people interested in “new ways of working” (NWoW). This excitement about new ways of working is embedded into a broader set of trends and developments concerning how people work and organize together, with work in the 21st century becoming increasingly team-based, knowledge-based, flexible, digital, and remote (de Vaujany et al., 2021; Ferdous et al., 2025; Kingma, 2019; Leonardi et al., 2024; Rhymer, 2023; Staples et al., 1999).

Populated by practitioners across organizational domains and ranks, the NWoW movement seems commonly concerned with concrete practices and tools for organizing differently—such as W.L. Gore’s waterline metaphor, Buurtzorg’s evolving purpose, or Morning Star’s Colleague Letters of Understanding (or CLOUs)—and the “new way of thinking about people and organizations” (Dignan, 2019, p. 13) that these practices and tools exemplify, rather than these organizations’ overarching structures and designs (Dignan, 2019; Laloux, 2014; Minnaar & de Morree, 2019). Beyond its focus on organizational success stories, the NWoW movement is strongly influenced by a multitude of concepts, resources, and people (see the Appendix for an overview), including: popular management books and associated concepts like the “liberated” company (Carney & Getz, 2016), Holacracy (Robertson, 2015), or Teal (Laloux, 2014); consultant-led blogs and podcasts like Corporate Rebels (see also Minnaar & de Morree, 2019), Brave New Work (see also Dignan, 2019), or Leadermorphosis (see also Tenelius & Gill, 2020); as well as founder-CEOs and management gurus like Ricardo Semler (Semler, 1993), Jos de Blok (de Blok & Pool, 2010), or Gary Hamel (Hamel & Zanini, 2020). The general spirit of the NWoW movement is captured by the “Corporate Rebels” and their self-description on their website: “We build self-managed organizations that crush bureaucracy, drive explosive growth, and restore humanity to work. Not someday. Today.” (Corporate Rebels, n.d.).

Among scholars, the same stories and cases are frequently drawn upon in discussions about “new organizational forms” (Daft & Lewin, 1993; Heydebrand, 1989; Puranam et al., 2014). These and other cases are then used as examples of new forms, characterized with an increasing variety of labels—from “less-hierarchical” (Billinger & Workiewicz, 2019) and “boss-less” (Ketkar & Workiewicz, 2022) over “self-managing” (Lee & Edmondson, 2017) and “decentralized” (Lee, 2024) to “agile” (Rigby et al., 2016) and “holacratic” (Farkhondeh & Müller, 2021). In this thesis, focus is placed on three labels which are particularly prominent in

the recent new forms discourse, specifically in relation to cases from the NWoW movement: “less-hierarchical”, “self-managing”, and “agile”.

2.1.1. *“Less-hierarchical”*

New organizational forms have been commonly defined in direct opposition to bureaucracy and managerial hierarchy as the dominant organizational forms. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, the notion of “post-bureaucratic” organizations was particularly prominent (Alvesson & Thompson, 2006; Child & McGrath, 2001; Heckscher, 1994; Heydebrand, 1989). As fascination with the “post-bureaucratic” label has decreased, scholars now more commonly characterize new forms as “less-hierarchical” (e.g., Billinger & Workiewicz, 2019; Lee & Edmondson, 2017).

The “less-hierarchical” signifier—same as related labels such as “flat” (Baumann & Wu, 2022), “boss-less” (Ketkar & Workiewicz, 2022), or “non-hierarchical” (Lee et al., 2023)—basically indicates a (more or less radical) reduction in the number of layers of managerial authority. Though most of the radical cases of “less-hierarchical” organizing focus on relatively small organizations, popular success stories also include companies from around the world employing thousands of people, such as W.L. Gore, Haier, and Buurtzorg (Hamel & Zanini, 2020; Laloux, 2014). A particular interest of this research community also lies in technological innovations and the organizational forms that they enable, such as online communities (Kolbjørnsrud, 2018; see also Levine & Prietula, 2014); digital platforms and Holacracy (Bernstein et al., 2016; Hsieh & Vergne, 2022; Romme, 2019; see also Schüßler et al., 2021), blockchain and decentralized autonomous organizations, or DAOs (Hsieh et al., 2018; Vergne, 2020), and artificial intelligence (Baumann & Wu, 2023).

2.1.2. *“Self-managing”*

Originally applied in the context of teams (Barker, 1993; Langfred, 2000, 2004; Magpili & Pazos, 2018), the label of “self-managing” organizations has recently grown in popularity among both researchers and practitioners.² Following Lee and Edmondson (2017), a “self-managing organization” deviates radically, holistically, and formally from the traditional managerial hierarchy and its centralized decision-making authority. A self-managing organization hence has no layers of managerial hierarchy anywhere in the organization, decentralizing decision-making authority through formalized and explicit rules. The self-managing organization may be seen as an ideal-typical organizational form (Martela, 2019)—the most radical form of a less-hierarchical organization. In recent works building on Lee and Edmondson (2017), the adjective “self-managing” has increasingly been toned down, instead highlighting such new organizational forms as “(radically) decentralized” (e.g., Lee, 2024; Salovaara et al., 2024). The main case organizations Lee and Edmondson (2017) use to illustrate their self-managing organization concept are Zappos, Valve, and Morning Star—all of them US-based, all of them popular mainstays in the scholarly discussion on new organizational forms as well as in the NWoW practitioner movement.

² Regarding the practitioner popularity of “self-managing” as a label, see also: <https://www.corporate-rebels.com/blog/progressive-bossless-self-managed-flat-adaptive>.

2.1.3. “Agile”

New organizational forms are often seen as a response to the uncertainty inherent in increasingly dynamic and complex environments, with organizations being attracted to such forms in their pursuit of increased flexibility and innovation (Schreyögg & Sydow, 2010). It is in this context that the phenomenon of “agile organizations” (Girod & Králik, 2021; Rigby et al., 2020; Teece et al., 2016) may be understood. Aiming to scale the success of agile software development teams and their inherent embracing of change and uncertainty (Beck et al., 2001; Boehm & Turner, 2005) to an organizational level (Dingsøyr et al., 2018; Rigby et al., 2016), “agile” organizations shall be capable of flexibly dealing with change and uncertainty (Doz & Kosonen, 2008; Dyer & Shafer, 1999; Weber & Tarba, 2014).

Popular cases in the discussion on “agile” organizations include the transformation journeys of established tech giants like Microsoft, Ericsson, and Nokia (Denning, 2019; Doz & Kosonen, 2008; Paasivaara et al., 2018) as well as the emergence of new tech firms like Amazon, Spotify, and Netflix (Denning, 2018, 2019; Rigby et al., 2018). Recently, increasing attention has been paid to “agile” organizing in more traditional industries as well as in the public sector (see e.g., Girod & Králik, 2021; Kreye et al., 2024; Mergel, 2024).

2.2. “Traditional forms”: A brief history of organization (design) theory

Before diving deeper into the narrative and concept of “new organizational forms”, a theoretical baseline will be established. If “less-hierarchical”, “self-managing”, and “agile” organizational forms are “new”, what do “traditional” organizational forms look like, and how did they come about?

This section offers a brief history of organization (design) theory³ and how related thought developed over time. It begins by looking at classical organization theorists (Fayol, 1949; Taylor, 1911; Weber, 1922) and how they established bureaucracy and managerial hierarchy as the traditional organizational forms of the 20th century. Then, it turns to neoclassical scholars who critiqued the instrumental-rational focus of these forms, instead highlighting the human factors in organizing (Barnard, 1938; Follett, 1941; Mayo, 1933; McGregor, 1960). Finally, attention is directed towards selected modern organization theories—particularly, contingency theory (Burns & Stalker, 1961; Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967), transaction cost economics theory (Coase, 1937; Williamson, 1975), and institutional theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977)—and how they have, or have *not*, broadened our view of organizational forms beyond bureaucracy and managerial hierarchy.

2.2.1. *Classical theories: Bureaucracy and managerial hierarchy*

Organizations are omnipresent in contemporary life (Barley, 2016; Luhmann, 2000; Mintzberg, 2023). This was not always the case. Designating “organizations” as specific designable social systems became meaningful and necessary only in the late 19th to early 20th century, with the rise of industrial mass production (Bodrožić & Adler, 2018; Drucker, 2001; Luhmann, 2000; Scott & Davis, 2007). The ideal of formal bureaucratic and hierarchical organizations—so

³ The use of the parenthesis in “organization (design) theory” is meant to indicate that this thesis is primarily contextualized within the literature on organization design, though regularly moving into arguments borrowed from the broader literature on organization theory.

dominant in our thought, culture, and practice to this day (Foss & Klein, 2022; Monteiro & Adler, 2022)—is, historically speaking, a rather recent phenomenon (Child, 2019; Graeber & Wengrow, 2021; Narayanan et al., 2021).⁴

The rise of industrial mass production throughout the 19th century, and associated poor working conditions, led to increasing conflicts between industrialists and workers. Some industrialists put their efforts into “industrial betterment” (see e.g., Olmstead, 1900), aiming to increase worker commitment—and, as a result, productivity—through providing community infrastructure (schools, libraries, churches, and more) close to the factory (Barley & Kunda, 1992). At the turn of the 20th century, a different set of concerns arose among mechanical engineers close to the shopfloor in US industrial firms: How could work be designed and distributed to achieve maximum efficiency? Frederick Taylor’s (1911) related approach of “scientific management” became prominent in industrial firms as well as business schools. In the eyes of mechanical engineers like Taylor, organization was a purely technical problem: Experts need to define the tasks to be done meticulously, identify how to do them most efficiently, find the physiologically most capable workers to do the job, and determine fair pay for these workers to execute the tasks accordingly. The metaphor of the organization as a machine was born. With the idea of expert managers and their intellectual superiority over workers, the foundation for the rise of managerial hierarchy was laid.

In parallel with Taylor, French mining engineer Henri Fayol (1949) proposed 14 “principles” of management based on his decades-long career as a successful business leader. These principles included—among others—specialized division of labor, managerial authority, unity of command, centralization, and communication strictly following the line of authority (scalar chain). Although their analytical perspectives were opposite—Taylor looking at the organization from the bottom-up and Fayol from the top-down (cf. Okhuysen & Bechky, 2009)—both essentially arrived at formal managerial hierarchy as the prototypical organizational form. The ideas of Taylor and Fayol remain dominant in contemporary thought and practice of organization design (at least implicitly), particularly in those of economist and management traditions (see e.g., Petriglieri, 2020b).

In parallel with Fayol, German sociologist Max Weber (1922) developed the idea of “bureaucracy”. Weber was particularly interested in characterizing economics and society through different logics of social action and associated types of legitimate authority. One of these types, legal-rational authority, formed the basis for bureaucracy as an organizational form. Weber suggested six principles underlying bureaucracy: division of labor, hierarchy of office, strict separation between work and private life, specialization of skills, full dedication of workers to one workplace, and prevalence of rules.

The underlying principles of Weberian bureaucracy look much like those of managerial hierarchy as per Taylor and Fayol. Yes, managerial hierarchy defines overarching structures while bureaucracy focuses on shaping human behavior through rules and procedures—but both imply hierarchy, formalization, specialization, and centralization; both aim to maximize

⁴ This is *not* to say that techniques and understandings of what we today call “organization(s)” were non-existent or all-primitive before the late 19th century (see e.g., Graeber & Wengrow, 2021; Peltonen et al., 2017).

predictability and efficiency. Indeed, managerial hierarchy and bureaucracy often go hand-in-hand and are frequently treated interchangeably in the literature (see e.g., Child, 2019).

There is, however, an important difference in the origins and intentions of these two organizational forms. Whereas managerial hierarchy's underlying principles as proposed by Taylor and Fayol were developed empirically and are normative in nature, Weber—contrary to some people's perception (Kühl, 2020)—originally envisioned bureaucracy as a purely conceptual, ideal-typical form. Pure bureaucracy was to be seen as an analytical boundary case, rarely (if at all) observable in reality (Weber, 1922, p. 677). Nonetheless, Weber saw bureaucracy—in its ideal state—as a desirable and inherently superior form to the then-dominant patrimonial and charismatic rule, presumably leading to bureaucracy's widespread reception as a normative concept. As such, Weber's principles of bureaucracy remain prevalent in most contemporary organizations (see e.g., Monteiro & Adler, 2022).

2.2.2. *Neo-classical theories: The human factors*

As a response to scientific management and its heavy focus on the meticulous design of work tasks, increasing interest arose in the human factors of work. Accordingly, the turn of the 20th century saw numerous studies into factory workers' productivity and fatigue in light of long working hours executing monotonous tasks (cf. Barley & Kunda, 1992). Informed by emerging insights from the field of psychology, scholars and practitioners became particularly concerned about work ergonomics. Where should machines and workbenches be placed? What is the optimal lighting to increase productivity on the shopfloor? How many hours should people work, and how many breaks should they get?

Experiments based on these questions formed the point of departure for the famous Hawthorne studies,⁵ spearheaded by Elton Mayo. However, Mayo (1933) found that changes in lighting, seating, working hours, break schedules and the like did *not* impact workers' productivity as much as imagined. To Mayo, the key factor instead was workers' *morale*, which was largely determined by workers' social relationships amongst each other and with their supervisor. In the interest of morale and productivity, supervisors should care more about workers and their personal concerns. With that, the “Human Relations” movement was born.

Despite highlighting the importance of human beings and social relationships for determining work outcomes, how “human” Mayo (1933) and the Human Relations movement were in their orientation has been called into question by several scholars. These scholars interpret Human Relations' concern for workers' morale as an instrumental tool for boosting firm productivity at best, and at worst as an attempt to preserve existing power structures—financed by industrial empires like the Rockefeller's (Bruce & Nyland, 2011; Miles & Creed, 1995; O'Connor, 1999). As such, the Human Relations movement may be better viewed as a continuation of, rather than a radical departure from, the thought and trajectory of scientific management (Bodrožić & Adler, 2018; O'Connor, 1999; Petriglieri, 2020b). Subsequent psychological studies of human motivation (Maslow, 1943; McGregor, 1960) and the associated “Human Resources” tradition (Argyris, 1964; Bennis, 1963)—though increasingly positioning workers as creative assets and

⁵ The focus here is on contextualizing the birth of the “Human Relations” movement based on the Hawthorne studies, not to elaborate on their methodological critique and related implications of the Hawthorne effect.

promoting their “empowerment”—may similarly be seen as largely upholding rather than challenging the primacy of organizational efficiency and the associated logics of bureaucracy and managerial hierarchy (see Miles & Creed, 1995).

A more explicit concern for people was inherent in other works of the time, especially those of Chester Barnard (1938) and Mary Parker Follett (1918, 1924, 1941). Both Barnard and Follett highlighted the importance of communal collaboration and interpersonal relationships, moving beyond a focus on individual human motivation and towards a social-psychological perspective. Particularly Follett—a contemporary of Taylor—challenged dominant beliefs and structures of authority and power, calling key tenets of bureaucracy and managerial hierarchy into question (e.g., Follett, 1941). However, her work has long been overshadowed by Mayo’s Human Relations approach, her significance remaining largely concealed from organization and management thought and her contribution being (re)discovered only recently (Ansell, 2009; Drucker, 1995; Feldheim, 2004; O’Connor, 2000).

2.2.3. *Modern theories: Beyond bureaucracy and managerial hierarchy*

Since the middle of the 20th century, the study of organization(s) has proliferated and branched into countless theoretical streams. This sub-section focuses on three particularly prominent strands of thought—namely contingency theory, transaction cost economics theory, and institutional theory—and how they have (not) provided nuance to our understanding of organizational forms outside bureaucracy and managerial hierarchy.

Whereas classical theories present bureaucracy and managerial hierarchy as inherently superior forms, contingency theory (e.g., Burns & Stalker, 1961; Chandler, 1962; Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967) adds some subtlety to the argument: The optimal organizational form is contingent on contextual factors such as an organization’s size, industry, or the degree of uncertainty and complexity in its environment. Following Burns and Stalker (1961), “mechanistic” organizations (e.g., bureaucratic and hierarchical ones) are good at producing efficient results in predictable and stable environments, whereas if you aim for innovation and/or deal with highly dynamic and complex environments, a more “organic” organizational form is preferred.

Operating from a contingency approach, several scholars proposed more intricate organizational forms, both reflecting and informing organizational practice in industry firms of the time. Forms such as the professional bureaucracy and divisionalized (Mintzberg, 1979) or matrix forms (Knight, 1976) became increasingly prominent. However, most of these, along with other more intricate forms, remain married to a structural logic of coordination and therefore present variations of, rather than clear departures from, bureaucracy and managerial hierarchy (cf. Fjeldstad et al., 2012). According to contingency theorists, there is no single best way of organizing—but there are still better (i.e., more efficient) ways than others, to be selected by (boundedly) rational expert decision-makers (cf. Galbraith, 1974; March & Simon, 1958).

Transaction cost economics theory operates on a similar ground. Building on Coase’s (1937) foundational work and Simon’s (1955) assumption of bounded rationality, Williamson (1975, 1981) originally conceived the question of organizational form as a binary choice between two ideal-typical “governance structures”. By default, one should buy/sell assets in the free *market* coordinated by price; if transaction costs (based on degree of uncertainty and asset specificity)

get too high, one should integrate into a *hierarchy* governed by authority. In later extensions of his work, Williamson (2005) moved from perceiving market and hierarchy as dichotomous opposites to portraying them as poles along a continuum, allowing for a variety of hybrid forms.⁶ Much like contingency theory, transaction cost economics theory opened the realm of conceptual possibilities—while staying true to classical theories and their perception of organization design as a (boundedly) rational search for the best possible organizational form.

While contingency and transaction cost economics theory—being rooted in economic and management traditions—focused on elaborating our understanding of managerial hierarchy and its alternatives, institutional theory—being rooted in a sociological tradition—had bureaucracy as its main conceptual target. The original interest of institutional theory was to explain similarity (rather than diversity) in organizations and their forms (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Following institutional theory, the continued prevalence of bureaucracy as the dominant organizational form may be better explained as compliance to norms, traditions, and (perceived) expectations from the external environment rather than as the outcome of rational choice (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). This marks a strict departure from the rationality and efficiency arguments inherent in previous theories.

Summing up, our understanding of organization(s) has evolved considerably over the last century or so. While most contemporary organizations do not seem to treat workers like easily replaceable cogs in a Taylorist machine anymore,⁷ key tenets of bureaucracy and managerial hierarchy continue to live on (Diefenbach, 2019; Foss & Klein, 2022; Monteiro & Adler, 2022). Neo-classical and modern organization theories nuanced the impression of bureaucracy and managerial hierarchy as the only viable organizational forms, though they did little to challenge their theoretical and practical dominance.

2.3. Of villains and heroes: The narrative of “new forms”

The recent excitement about “less-hierarchical”, “self-managing”, and “agile” organizing is embedded into a broader scholarly discussion about “new organizational forms” which has been ongoing since at least the late 1980s and early 1990s (Daft & Lewin, 1993; Drucker, 1988; Heydebrand, 1989; Miles & Snow, 1986). Though labels and trends in the scholarly discourse about “new organizational forms” have evolved over time, the underlying narrative structure used to describe the emergence of the “new” remains consistent. In essence, articles from 30 years ago tell the same base story as recent ones, though the main ingredients of the story may change. The base story of organizational form newness goes like this:⁸ A change in external or internal conditions causes disorder (*conflict*), implying that the dominant organizational form is not adequate anymore. The dominant organizational form, now regarded as the *villain*, hence should be replaced by a new organizational form (the *hero*) which will free us from the shackles of the villain and allow us to successfully tackle the new conditions. Much like practitioners

⁶ Other authors later speculated about a third ideal-typical organizational form (Adler, 2001; Heydebrand, 1989; Ouchi, 1980; Powell, 1990).

⁷ Such assessments tend to forget those who mine the lithium for our electric car batteries, those who sew our designer clothes, or those who deliver our pizza (see also Rosa, 2016).

⁸ The idea for identifying and outlining this base story was inspired by Monbiot (2017). It was only later that I discovered a similar portrayal of the villain and hero contrast between “new” and “traditional” forms in Florian’s (2018) article.

(e.g., Aldrich, 2011; Cunliffe & Coupland, 2012; Gabriel, 1995; Ruebottom, 2013; Whittle et al., 2009), organization and management scholars seem to love telling stories of villains and heroes to create legitimizing narratives of newness.

The descriptions of conflict and villain show relative consistency over time. The conflict is commonly associated with an increasingly dynamic and complex environment, often caused by the emergence of new technologies (e.g., Daft & Lewin, 1993; Farkhondeh & Müller, 2021; Felin & Powell, 2016; Heydebrand, 1989; Medina et al., 2005; Schreyögg & Sydow, 2010).⁹ The villain, then, is usually portrayed as (*managerial*) *hierarchy* and/or *bureaucracy* (see also Florian, 2018). Most commonly, new organizational forms are portrayed in opposition to managerial hierarchy as the dominant organizational form of the 20th century. Some authors even define the new forms through their stance against hierarchy, for instance by calling them “less-hierarchical” (Billinger & Workiewicz, 2019) or “non-hierarchical” (Kornberger et al., 2017). Similarly, many scholars position new organizational forms against bureaucracy, for instance by calling them “post-bureaucratic” (Heckscher, 1994; Heydebrand, 1989). New organizational forms are often regarded as abolishing (or at least reducing) foundational principles of Weberian (1968) bureaucracy such as centralization and formalization (Dunford et al., 2007), specialization (Melé, 2005), and rational planning (Dent, 1995). More generally, several scholars see new organizational forms as a departure from the traditional management “paradigm” (Farkhondeh & Müller, 2021; Graetz & Smith, 2008; Martela, 2019).

While descriptions of conflict and villain remained rather consistent over time, the image of the hero—capturing the most defining characteristic of a new organizational form—changed more noticeably. This underlines the evolution of new organizational forms and the academic conversation about them over time, with different concepts, or “heroes”, moving in and out of fashion. The late 1980s and early 1990s saw the rise of computers and early information technology, coinciding with increased international competition (Heydebrand, 1989; Miles, 1989). These changes led to more dynamic, uncertain, and complex business environments (Miles & Snow, 1984; Starkey et al., 1991), asking established industry firms to become more flexible than their traditional bureaucratic processes and hierarchical structures would allow (Heydebrand, 1989; Romanelli, 1991). The designated savior was *innovation* (Heydebrand, 1989; Miles & Snow, 1986; Zajac et al., 1991), leveraging a new culture of information sharing (Heydebrand, 1989; Miles & Snow, 1986). With higher innovativeness, firms would be able to successfully compete in a constantly evolving, global competitive landscape—just like pioneering industry firms such as IBM, General Electric, and Toyota.

Throughout the 1990s, the rise of the Internet and other information and communication technologies (ICT) (Fulk & DeSanctis, 1995; Rockart, 1998; Scott Morton, 1995), combined with societal changes like aging populations in major industrial economies (Daft & Lewin, 1993; Fulk & DeSanctis, 1995; Ilinitich et al., 1996), led to hypercompetitive global market environments (Chakravarthy & Gargiulo, 1998; Dent, 1995; Ilinitich et al., 1996). The then-dominant tendency towards forming massive hierarchical conglomerates to achieve maximum economies of scale and scope needed to be reversed, marking a widespread return to market

⁹ Some scholars find the assumption of ever-increasing dynamism and complexity ill-substantiated and/or socially constructed (du Gay & Vikkelsø, 2017; Monteiro & Adler, 2022; Rosa, 2005).

principles (Dent, 1995; Osborn, 1998; Rockart, 1998). In this time, the idea of *network* organizations proliferated (Daft & Lewin, 1993; Ilinitch et al., 1996; Webster, 1993). Building both on the affordances of ICT and the necessity for increased interorganizational collaboration, many organizations preferred strategic partnerships, alliances, or joint ventures over fully integrated organizational setups (Miles & Creed, 1995; Osborn, 1998; Webster, 1993). The concept of the networked or “virtual” organization (DeSanctis & Monge, 1999; Grandori, 1997a; Miles & Snow, 1995), increasingly boundaryless (Fulk & DeSanctis, 1995), reflected large organizations’ increased focus on their core business through efforts such as “outsourcing” or “vertical disaggregation” (Rockart, 1998; Zenger & Hesterly, 1997).

Around the turn of the millennium, discussions about ICT and globalization were still on the rise (Child & McGrath, 2001; Dijksterhuis et al., 1999; Foss, 2003). Amidst a business environment perceived as increasingly chaotic (Dijksterhuis et al., 1999; Lewin et al., 1999), a knowledge and information economy emerged (Child & McGrath, 2001; Gunasekaran et al., 2005). The key to organizational success was now less about ownership and efficient use of resources—which hierarchical structures and bureaucratic procedures are geared towards—and more about bringing the right information and knowledge together at the right time, flexibly and quickly (Child & McGrath, 2001; Foss, 2003; McNulty & Ferlie, 2004). New organizational forms at the time hence needed to be characterized by increased flexibility, or *agility* (Dijksterhuis et al., 1999; Gunasekaran et al., 2005; Whittington et al., 1999). Pertinently, organizational action and power was increasingly located within (project) teams (Foss, 2003; Oliver & Montgomery, 2000; Whittington et al., 1999). These teams of knowledge workers, often designed in a cross-functional and/or agile fashion, could now work closer to customers and solve evolving challenges more swiftly than within traditional divisional structures (Pettigrew et al., 2000; Wenger & Snyder, 2000; Whittington et al., 1999). Building on the affordances of ICT (and later, the necessities of the COVID-19 pandemic), knowledge work has since become much more flexible, distributed, and remote—a trend which massively alters how people work and organize together (de Vaujany et al., 2021; Ferdous et al., 2025; Kingma, 2019; Leonardi et al., 2024; Rhymer, 2023; Staples et al., 1999).

In the second half of the 2000s, the arguments against managerial hierarchy and bureaucracy, hitherto mainly raised in the context of business firms, were now increasingly being extended to public sector organizations (Bezes, 2007; Briand & Bellemare, 2006; Harris, 2006). Much like private organizations, public sector organizations experienced increasing pressures for increased efficiency (David et al., 2013; Sparrow & Cooper, 1998), reduced costs (Gunasekaran et al., 2005; Morris & Farrell, 2007), and improved performance (Crifo-Tillet & Villeval, 2001; Morris & Farrell, 2007). Addressing these concerns, organizations at the time commonly engaged in efforts of downsizing or *delaying*, removing hierarchical layers of middle management (Graetz & Smith, 2009; Morris et al., 2006; Morris & Farrell, 2007; Ormrod et al., 2007). In the public sector, these and related efforts were commonly summarized under the label of “post-bureaucracy” and connected to the idea of “New Public Management”, which aimed to make public administration more business-like (Bezes, 2007; McSweeney, 2006; Morris & Farrell, 2007; see already du Gay, 2000, and Heckscher, 1994).

Since the 2010s, a greater variety of narratives about new organizational forms and their emergence is observable. Arguments of technological changes—most recently triggered by

digital technologies like blockchain, big data, and artificial intelligence (e.g., Endrissat & Islam, 2022; Etter et al., 2019; Santana & Albareda, 2022; Volberda et al., 2021)—are increasingly accompanied by those of broader societal and political changes such as the rise of income inequality, neoliberalism, or migration (Bapuji & Neville, 2015; Fjeldstad et al., 2012; Kokkinidis, 2015; Zapata Campos, 2024). Several scholars also relate the emergence of “new” and “alternative” organizational forms such as “worker collectives” or “commercial trusts” to specific events such as the 2008 financial crisis or the COVID-19 pandemic (Hachigian, 2024; Kokkinidis, 2015; Martí & Fernández, 2015).

Throughout the 2010s, the image of the villain was not as centered around hierarchy and bureaucracy anymore; instead, the shareholder-owned business corporation (as pars pro toto for the extant capitalist economic and societal system) became a prominent antagonist (Daskalaki et al., 2015; Kokkinidis, 2015; Meyer & Höllerer, 2014). This shift can largely be attributed to the rising critical management studies stream, taking interest in “alternative” organizations such as social movements, activist networks, or cooperatives (Kokkinidis, 2015; Parker et al., 2014b) and their pioneering of a more “democratic” approach to organizing (see also Battilana et al., 2018; Diefenbach, 2020; Grandori, 2016; Landemore & Ferreras, 2016; Shymko & Frémeaux, 2022). Within and beyond this stream, a common point of emphasis for new organizational forms became their *self-organization* (e.g., Daskalaki et al., 2015; Felin & Powell, 2016; Fjeldstad et al., 2012; Nonaka et al., 2014; Wang et al., 2013). From traditional hierarchical contexts (Fjeldstad et al., 2012; Nonaka et al., 2014) over online communities (Felin & Powell, 2016; Puranam et al., 2014; Wang et al., 2013) to worker collectives (Kokkinidis, 2015)—self-organization is said to leverage new organizing principles (Felin & Powell, 2016; Kokkinidis, 2015; Meyer & Höllerer, 2014) which empower both increased individual participation (Fjeldstad et al., 2012; Kokkinidis, 2015; Wang et al., 2013) and closer collective collaboration (Felin & Powell, 2016; Fjeldstad et al., 2012; Levine & Prietula, 2014).

In most recent years, the description of the villain is more explicitly focused on hierarchy again (e.g., Billinger & Workiewicz, 2019; Dahlman et al., 2022; Farkhondeh & Müller, 2021; Soetens & Huybrechts, 2023). Often, accounts of hierarchy as the villain are embedded in, or accompanied by, a positioning of the new organizational form against bureaucracy (e.g., Farrell & Morris, 2017; Lekkas & Souitaris, 2023; Martela, 2019). Within the alternative organizations community, the shareholder-owned business corporation—as representative of a flawed capitalist system and characterized by managerial hierarchy—remains the core enemy (e.g., Etter et al. 2019; Mandalaki and Fotaki 2020; Dahlman et al. 2022).

The common hero in most recent new forms research, across streams, is *decentralization* of decision-making authority and control. While this is most apparent in new organizational forms like DAOs (Hsieh & Vergne, 2022) and Holacracy (Farkhondeh & Müller, 2021), it is also seen as characteristic of, for instance, online platforms and communities (Lekkas & Souitaris, 2023; Lin & Wang, 2020), worker cooperatives (Soetens & Huybrechts, 2023), and contemporary public sector organizations (Kirkpatrick et al., 2017). The notion of decentralization is also central to Lee and Edmondson’s (2017) popular concept of “self-managing organizations”. Indeed, the “decentralized” organization seems to gain steam as a possible new label (see Lee, 2024; Salovaara et al., 2024). According to scholars, decentralized organizing enables the creation of new realities through imagination, innovation, and prefiguration (Dahlman et al.,

2022; Kociatkiewicz & Kostera, 2018; Lekkas & Souitaris, 2023; Martela, 2019); it defies traditional hierarchical organizing by adopting principles of community, openness, and voluntarism (Hsieh & Vergne, 2022; Kolbjørnsrud, 2018; Kruse et al., 2022; Mandalaki & Fotaki, 2020; Soetens & Huybrechts, 2023). While most scholars regard decentralization in new organizational forms as generally desirable, others present a more critical stance (de Vaujany et al., 2021; Martínez Lucio et al., 2017).

Altogether, chapter 2 situated the discourse about new organizational forms within extant organization (design) theory, describing the phenomenon and its associated labels of “less-hierarchical”, “self-managing”, and “agile” organizing vis-à-vis the “traditional” organizational forms of bureaucracy and managerial hierarchy they are commonly positioned against. Though instantiated by different trends and developments over time—from innovation and network over agility and delayering to self-organization and decentralization—the emergence of “new organizational forms” is commonly narrated as a story of heroic emancipation from the villainous “traditional” forms.

3. Scrutinizing the new forms discourse

Following chapter 2's situating description of the new forms discourse, chapter 3 adopts a more analytical mode to scrutinize the discourse about "new organizational forms". First, section 3.1 examines the meaning of the "new organizational forms" concept as inherent in its three component terms. Then, section 3.2 interprets new forms as moves away from managerial hierarchy within organizational form typologies. Next, section 3.3 investigates the related narrative of emancipation from managerial hierarchy as inherent in the "new organizational forms" discourse, spotlighting associated debates between new form proponents and critics. Intending to move beyond these debates, section 3.4 articulates the need for an alternative perspective on "new organizational forms". Overall, the intention with this chapter is not to discredit the "traditional" or romanticize the "new" forms, but to scrutinize the discourse about the latter while appreciating the former as critical points of reference for said discourse.

3.1. Scrutinizing the concept: The meaning of "new organizational forms"

Like other concepts in organization studies, "new organizational form" is frequently used but rarely defined, possibly diluting its meaning (Alvesson & Blom, 2022; Palmer et al., 2007). Rather than taking it for granted, this thesis views "new organizational form" as a conceptual notion constructed and used by researchers to talk about some perceived phenomenon—a notion whose meaning requires critical examination. In this section, the "new organizational forms" notion is hence deconstructed into its three components to discuss what each of them implies in the context of organization design. This deconstruction moves from the back ("form") over the middle ("organization[al]") to the front ("new") of the notion.

3.1.1. *Form*

The notion of "form"—unlike those of "organization" and "new"—has been largely taken for granted in the (new) organizational forms discussion (cf. Pólos et al., 2002). This seems surprising, given the prominence of the "organizational form" concept in so many organization theories (e.g., DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Follett, 1941; Hannan & Freeman, 1977; Law, 1992; Nickerson & Zenger, 2004; Weber, 1968; Williamson, 1975).

As a noun, "form" is common in all Romance and Germanic languages. The originally Latin word "forma" mainly denoted the *shape* or *configuration* of something—in other words, how something *looks* or how its parts are *arranged* (Oxford English Dictionary, 2024). These and related modern uses of "form" highlight "the *visible* aspect of a thing", its "particular *character, nature, structure, or constitution*" (Oxford English Dictionary, 2024). Connectedly, "form" commonly suggests a sense of *structure* and *order* (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.; Merriam-Webster, n.d.; Oxford English Dictionary, 2024).

More generally, "form" can indicate: a specific "*type* or *kind* of something" (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.); a "*mode*" of existence or manifestation (Merriam-Webster, n.d.; Oxford English Dictionary, 2024); a "*model*" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.; Oxford English Dictionary, 2024); a "*category*" (Oxford English Dictionary, 2024); or a "distinguishable *group*" of something (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). "Form" can also characterize behavior, designating how something is being done—a "*pattern*" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.) or "*way*" (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.; Oxford English Dictionary, 2024) of doing something—often in a prescribed,

rule-based way. As such, “form” implies distinction from the environment (including other “forms”)—a thought inherent also in Spencer-Brown’s (1969) foundational mathematical work on “Laws of Form”, which has received some recognition and application in organization studies (e.g., Hernes, 2007; Luhmann, 2000; Seidl & Becker, 2006).

The purpose of reciting generic dictionary definitions is to show the variety of meanings “form” *can* take. As we turn our attention to organization design literature and, specifically, the “new organizational forms” discourse, we encounter many of these meanings—and more. In the context of (organization) design and architecture, “form” typically focuses on the *structure* and *appearance* of an entity, put in (commonly contrasting) relationship to its purpose or “function” (Ching, 2007; Fjeldstad et al., 2012; Greenough, 1947; Simon, 1988). When scholars talk about “organizational form”, they commonly have a formal organization and its structures in mind.

“New organizational *form*”, then, has been defined as (or used synonymously to) a specific: organizational *configuration* (Meyer et al., 1993); *arrangement* of features (Ruef, 2000); organization *structure* (Zajac et al., 1991); organization *design* (Daft & Lewin, 1993); (arche)*type* (Ciabuschi et al., 2020); *mode* of governance (Grandori, 1997b); organizational *model* (Miles et al., 2009); organizing *template* (Powell & DiMaggio, 1991); *category* of organizations (Hernes, 2007); *pattern* of interaction (Zammuto et al., 2007); *blueprint* for action (Hannan & Freeman, 1977); or *way* of organizing (Farkhondeh & Müller, 2021). Given this variety of interpretations, “new organizational forms” could be anything—from research partnerships in post-communist Eastern Europe (Balázs, 1995) to communities of practice (Wenger & Snyder, 2000), from movie theaters (Li & Khessina, 2024) to “app-based doctors’ house calls” (Ha et al., 2024), from the gig economy (Carr and Kelan 2023; de Vaujany *et al.* 2021) to coworking spaces (Blagoev et al., 2019).

In sum, the extant use of the term “form” in “new organizational form” appears problematic in two ways. First, it conflates a plethora of meanings, hence being a vague and overly inclusive signifier of anything remotely special about (an) organization (cf. Miller et al., 2009). A specific organizational form is distinct from others—but what is this distinction based on? Second, it primes us for a static, structural view of organization, inviting an overemphasis on *formal* structure and outer appearance. In the interest of broadening our understanding of “organization” as a multifaceted, designable social phenomenon, the extant use of “form” may need to be challenged (Grandori & Furnari, 2008; consider also Kühl, 2013; Meyer & Höllerer, 2014).

3.1.2. *Organization*

Despite its current-day prominence, the concept of “organization” is—historically speaking—a rather recent addition to our (scientific) vocabulary (Drucker, 2001; Luhmann, 2000; Scott & Davis, 2007). The term “organization” is commonly used to describe both an *activity* and its *outcome* at the same time, without making a distinction between the two (Luhmann, 2000). Several meanings are therefore conflated in “organization”.

Generally, “organization” may be viewed as a specific type of *social system*, a certain kind of social institution—much like “family”, “community”, or “society” (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2011; Drucker, 1993; Luhmann, 2000; Selznick, 1994). At its base, an organization—just like other

social systems—is a group of people doing something together. What makes the organization a distinct social system, though, are two characteristics: *designability* and *goal orientation*. This does not mean that families, communities, or societies are immutable structures void of purpose—rather it means that organizations tend to be more designable and goal-oriented than other social systems.

Goal orientation implies that organizations exist to achieve specific system-level goals, not just for their own sake (Barnard, 1938; Drucker, 1993; Kühl, 2013; Puranam et al., 2014). An organization needs a specific purpose—otherwise the organization need not exist (Drucker, 1993). People form organizations to achieve joint goals which they could not achieve alone (Fjeldstad et al., 2012; King et al., 2010; Ouchi, 1980; Puranam et al., 2014). Correspondingly, organization is commonly perceived as a problem-solving activity (Fjeldstad et al., 2012; Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967; Martela, 2019; Miles et al., 1978; Puranam et al., 2014): Joint goals need to be broken down into tasks to be carried out by individual organizational members (division of labor), and their resulting activities need to be coordinated to ensure overarching goal fulfillment (integration of effort). This characterization of organizations is widely accepted.

Perhaps more profoundly (at least in the context of this thesis), *designability* indicates that the organization is human-made (Puranam, 2024)—it is an “instrument” (Selznick, 1994); a “social invention” (Greenfield, 1973); a “social tool” (King et al., 2010); a “social technology” (Walsh et al., 2006). As such, organizations are “social constructions” rather than “an immutable fact of economic and social life” (Walsh et al., 2006, p. 661). This characterization is frequently neglected, taking organizations and their (power) structures as given and reifying them. Counter to common perception, organizations cannot act in and of themselves—they do so only through people (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1994; Meyer & Höllerer, 2014; Selznick, 1994).

The characteristic of designability hence invites views beyond “organization” as a structural outcome or entity (noun), instead focusing on “organizing” as ongoing process (verb). Several authors believe that an emphasis on “organizing” allows scholars to capture the (increasingly) dynamic and processual nature of the (organizational) world (e.g., Davis & DeWitt, 2021; Okhuysen & Bechky, 2009; Pettigrew et al., 2000; Puranam et al., 2014; Yoo et al., 2006). Organization is therefore not structurally fixed but constantly constituted through human (inter)action (Zack & McKenney, 2009; see also Giddens, 1984). Relatedly, the term “organizational form” invites a focus on an organization’s (structural) attributes, whereas “form of organizing” seems more concerned with “how the organization works” (Puranam et al., 2014, p. 175). Put differently, “[a]n organization of individuals who constitute an ongoing enterprise is only one form of organization that can result from the process of organizing” (Ostrom, 2011, p. 39).

The promise of a processual view, though, does not lie in a linguistic twist or in paying lip service to Weick (1979); it lies in broadening our understanding of “organization” as a concept, inviting us to look beyond the “formal organization” as “rationalized cultural product” (Meyer & Höllerer, 2014, p. 1221). As literature streams on organizationality (Dobusch & Schoeneborn, 2015; Schoeneborn et al., 2019), partial organization (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2011), hybrid organization (Battilana & Lee, 2014; Kolbjørnsrud, 2018), and alternative organization

(Parker et al., 2014a) demonstrate, “organization” can be found outside traditional, formal organizations; it is a matter of context and degree. If we want to understand “organization”, the formal organization may not be the most relevant and/or appropriate object of analysis anymore (Meyer & Höllerer, 2014). Accordingly, in this thesis “organization” is understood as a social technology designable “by humans for humans” (Puranam, 2024, p. 54); it describes, broadly speaking, how people are doing things together to achieve common goals. The concern in this thesis is hence not so much with “formal organizations” or “organizational forms” per se but with the instantiations, understandings, and implications of “organization” those entail—how they reflect and influence how people are doing things together to achieve common goals.

3.1.3. *New*

In an economy and society striving for continuous technology-enabled growth, both organizational scholars and practitioners seem fixated on the extraordinary—on anything “new” and “innovative” (du Gay & Vikkelsø, 2017; Hallonsten, 2023; Kärreman et al., 2021; North, 2013; Rosa, 2005; Styhre, 2006; Vinsel & Russell, 2020). The adjective “new” signals that something is different from what we know—that it did not exist until recently. As such, newness is inherently a matter of context, degree, and point of reference. In the words of Johannessen et al. (2001, p. 20): “what is new, how new, and new to whom?”.

In the context of new organizational forms, scholars hold different views regarding the degree of newness required for an organizational form to qualify as “new”. For some, a slight change in a specific organizational feature—an organization’s goals, structures, practices, etc.—may be enough (see e.g., Ha et al., 2024; Wenger & Snyder, 2000). For others, several features need to be different to establish newness (Pólos et al., 2002).

In today’s literature, Puranam et al.’s (2014) new form definition enjoys particular prominence—especially in the *Journal of Organization Design* community (see e.g., Billinger & Workiewicz, 2019; Martela, 2019). Following said definition, a new organizational form is constituted by a novel solution to at least one of the four “universal problems of organizing”, namely the division and allocation of tasks (i.e., division of labor) as well as the provision of rewards and information (i.e., integration of effort), or a novel constellation of solutions to these four problems. According to the authors, organizational form newness shall be judged in comparison to organizations with similar goals. In their words: “Comparing Wikipedia with, say, Microsoft is therefore less likely to be a useful exercise than comparing it with the Encyclopaedia Britannica if the goal is to understand novelty in forms of organizing” (Puranam et al., 2014, p. 167). This definition puts a lenient threshold on newness; the introduction of one specific practice impacting how an organization, say, allocates its tasks may be enough to establish it as a new form.

Given that most of our knowledge on organization(s) is derived from the analysis of large Western business corporations of the 20th and 21st century (see e.g., Walsh et al., 2006), what we regard as “new” about organizational forms is likely to be contextually bound and historically blind. People in today’s society tend to inflate the “superficially new”, as “genuine novelty” becomes harder to come by (Padgett & Powell, 2012). In that regard, it is not surprising that several scholars—new form proponents and critics alike—have questioned how “new”

many of the “new forms” actually are (e.g., Billinger & Workiewicz, 2019; Foss & Klein, 2022; Martela, 2019; Puranam et al., 2014; Walsh et al., 2006).

In summary, the conceptual notion of “new organizational forms” is inherently vague and fuzzy—it can (and is used to) capture a broad range of deviations in organizational characteristics compared to the traditional bureaucratic, hierarchical business firm. The terms “organization” and “form” prime us for a focus on formal organizations and their structures, underappreciating efforts and aspects of organizing beyond said scope. The term “new” reflects a cultural excitement for innovation and novelty, contributing to its wide application in the discourse about organizational forms.

3.2. Moving away from managerial hierarchy: Typologizing “new forms”

Amidst the outlined variety of labels (or heroes) populating the new forms discourse, how can we understand “new organizational forms” conceptually within the broader discussion about organizational forms? Purposefully narrowing the above-stated arguments, “new organizational forms” may be conceived as departures from (managerial) hierarchy as the prototypical organizational form. In this section, a fourfold base typology of organizational forms is developed before mapping selected new forms within said typology.

3.2.1. *Four ideal-typical organizational forms*

In extant literature, a plethora of different typologies describing ideal-typical organizational forms (and their underlying coordination mechanisms) have been proposed. The arguably most prominent typologies depart from transaction cost economics and Williamson’s (1975, 1981) classic distinction between *market* and *hierarchy*¹⁰ as the two prototypical organizational forms (see sub-section 2.2.3). Later extensions of this model concurred that there are more forms than markets, hierarchies, and market-hierarchy hybrids. For instance, Ouchi (1980) described the *clan* form; Heydebrand (1989) proposed the *democratic* form; Powell (1990) delineated the *network* form; and Adler (2001) put forward the *community* form. Though distinct in their terminology and points of emphasis, what unites the different authors’ descriptions of the “third” form is their shared emphasis on the importance of trust and interpersonal relationships.

If we broaden our view beyond the focused discussion of organizational forms and instead look at social systems and relationships more generally, a fourth prototypical form becomes apparent. In that regard, Fiske (1992) argued that any social setting—from group decision-making to conflict resolution, from families to religious groups, from sports teams to work organizations—can be organized based on four different base forms: *authority ranking* denotes resource distribution according to hierarchical rank; *market pricing* means determining fixed ratios for exchange; *equality matching* involves tracking and compensating imbalances; and *communal sharing* seeks unity through consensus and altruism. Following Fiske (1992), these forms shall be thought of as ideal-typical, meaning that in practice people commonly combine multiple forms—though any situation will be dominated by one of the forms.

¹⁰ Some authors refer to “bureaucracy” as a prototypical organizational form instead of “hierarchy” (e.g., Grandori & Furnari, 2008; Ouchi, 1980).

Comparing Fiske’s (1992) model to the previously presented typologies, authority ranking clearly maps to the hierarchical organizational form, and market pricing clearly connects to the market form. Meanwhile, a communal sharing logic seems inherent in Adler’s (2001) community form as well as Ouchi’s (1980) clan form and Powell’s (1990) network form. Finally, equality matching seems to govern some communes and anarchist organizations as captured in Heydebrand’s (1989) democratic form for instance (see also Kanter, 1972)—though some of these “democratic” organizations might be better characterized by a communal sharing logic. Overall, a typology with four ideal-typical organizational forms is proposed: Beyond the traditional *market* and *hierarchy* forms, we also find *equality* and *community* forms.¹¹

3.2.2. “New forms” as moves away from hierarchy

Outlining these four ideal-typical organizational forms as four quadrants in a fictional decision space, we can assume that hierarchy is the default form.¹² The development of new organizational forms would thus be interpreted as moves away from hierarchy (see Figure 1). Trying to map the various new organizational forms within this typology, we see that “new” essentially means “anything not looking like a traditional (managerial) hierarchy”. Looking at the three labels in focus for this thesis, “less-hierarchical” literally implies a reduction in managerial hierarchy as the dominant form—an unspecified move away from hierarchy. Similarly, “self-managing” means a decentralization of authority away from *managerial* hierarchy’s characteristic managers. Finally, “agile” introduces a performant characteristic outside the scope of this typology—though their focus on embracing change and uncertainty primes agile organizations for being different from traditional managerial hierarchies.¹³

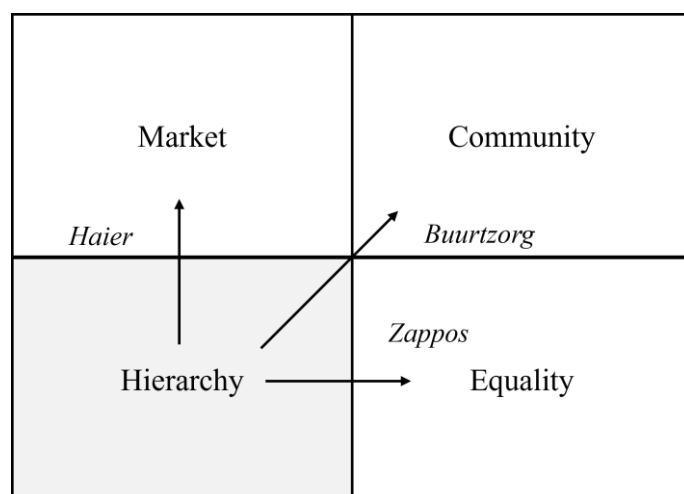


Figure 1: New organizational forms as moves away from hierarchy (source: author¹⁴)

¹¹ Similar fourfold typologies—though using different labels to characterize the base organizational forms—have previously been proposed by other scholars (e.g., Grandori & Furnari, 2008; Kornberger, 2022). In comparison to the typology proposed here, Grandori and Furnari (2008) substitute “hierarchy” with “bureaucracy” and “equality” with “democracy”, while Kornberger (2022) uses “institution” instead of “community” and “grassroot movements” instead of “equality”. The labels used here, as explained, have their roots in Fiske’s (1992) work and are believed to be more conceptually inclusive.

¹² This assumption will be put into perspective throughout this thesis, especially in sub-section 3.3.1.

¹³ This point gets further substantiated and discussed in paper III.

¹⁴ Though developed by myself, I find it relevant to mention that the base idea for mapping new organizational forms within a fourfold typology was spawned based on a personal conversation with Joost Minnaar, in which he

Looking at three popular cases from the NWoW movement, moves toward all three quadrants outside hierarchy become apparent. Haier, a Chinese appliance manufacturer employing more than 100,000 people, adopts what it calls the “Rendanheyi” model, which is designed around self-managing micro-enterprises who compete for attention and resources on internal markets. Haier heavily relies on internal contracting mechanisms and entrepreneurial activity from its employees (Hamel & Zanini, 2020; Lee et al., 2022). In short, Haier strongly adopts market elements in its organizational form.

US shoe retailer Zappos, on the other hand, was once regarded as a pioneer of Holacracy (Robertson, 2015)—an organizational model which is heavily inspired by Sociocracy (Endenburg, 1998) and its principles of equality, decentralization, and consent decision-making. Building on Holacracy’s circle structure and its obsession with clearly defined and transparent processes, roles, and rules (Bernstein et al., 2016; Romme, 2015), Zappos resembled elements of the equality form as also seen in some communes and anarchist organizations. Interestingly, Zappos has since moved away from Holacracy, instead drawing inspiration from Haier’s “Rendanheyi” model and its internal market approach (Minnaar, 2021).

Finally, Dutch healthcare organization Buurtzorg is widely praised for its community-based approach to care, facilitating its outstanding success and growth across all metrics. Buurtzorg’s self-managing teams of nurses involve patients (whom they refer to as “clients”), their families, and support networks from the surrounding community to provide neighborhood care. Buurtzorg’s approach aims to enable clients’ independence from professional care, focusing on social and emotional support beyond plain medical treatment (Laloux, 2014; Martela & Nandram, 2025; Nandram & Koster, 2014). In short, Buurtzorg’s organization design draws primarily on a community logic.

3.3. Scrutinizing the narrative: Between whataboutisms and idealizations

After critically examining the conceptual notion of “new organizational forms”, let us now also scrutinize the underlying narrative of the “heroic” new forms freeing us from the “villainous” traditional forms. In the scholarly debate about new forms, not everyone buys into said narrative. While many praise the revolutionary potentials of the “heroic” new forms (e.g., Hamel & Zanini, 2020; Laloux, 2014), others highlight their shortcomings and impossibilities and point towards the continued relevance of the—perhaps not so “villainous”—traditional forms (e.g., du Gay, 2000; Foss & Klein, 2022). As such, the new organizational forms discourse appears largely stuck between whataboutisms and idealizations—between romantic exaggerations and outright denials of the “new”.¹⁵

In this section, key debates about new organizational forms are being contoured, representing the views of both proponents and critics respectively with the aim of providing a somewhat nuanced account. These debates are concerned with possibilities and desirabilities of new organizational forms, and hence are formative for our current understanding of these forms.

described an ongoing paper project of his. The four prototypical organizational forms outlined in the matrix are developed based on existing literature as outlined. The typology shall not be interpreted as a 2x2-matrix with (missing) axes but rather, as mentioned, as a fictional decision space.

¹⁵ For a practitioner response to common whataboutisms, I refer the curious reader to Dutch cloud telephony company Voys’ description of their “organizational model”: <https://www.voys.co/voys-model/>.

3.3.1. *Is hierarchy inevitable?*

Though many scholars have sung its swansong, hierarchy seems remarkably persistent in current-day organizations (Child, 2019; Lee & Edmondson, 2017; Littler & Innes, 2004; Romme, 2019)—even those argued to be “less-hierarchical”, “self-managing”, and/or “agile” (Diefenbach & Sillince, 2011; Foss & Klein, 2022; see also Kärreman & Alvesson, 2004). Correspondingly, new form skeptics contend that hierarchy in organization(s) is unavoidable—at least in organizations of a certain size and complexity (Foss & Klein, 2022; Pfeffer, 2013; see also Luhmann, 2000).

Common arguments for the dominance of hierarchy draw on psychological, sociological, and economic domains (see also Battilana & Beckman, 2025; Lee, 2024). The psychological argument for hierarchy is that it provides the stability and security people are longing for in their relationships (Pfeffer, 2013); humans seem to have a “natural” tendency toward rank ordering, even if the ranking might place them in an inferior position (Lee, 2024; Rothschild-Whitt, 1979). The sociological argument is that hierarchy is largely taken for granted and provides legitimacy (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), with hierarchy being so deeply woven into our society and culture that most people lack the imagination, mindsets, and skills to organize any other way (Blaug, 2009; Diefenbach, 2019; Graeber & Wengrow, 2021). The economic argument is that hierarchy maximizes efficiency in complex environments, reducing uncertainty while providing stability and order (Galbraith, 1974; March & Simon, 1958; Williamson, 1981).

In the discussion on new organizational forms, critics are quick to point out failed initiatives of organizing without hierarchy. As the critics say, many such initiatives have eventually “degenerated” (Cornforth, 1995; Freeman, 1972; Michels, 1911), or reverted back to the hierarchical structures they originally opposed (Child, 2019; Foss & Klein, 2022; Romme, 2015; see even Kanter, 1972). A closer look at supposedly “non-hierarchical” forms reveals that many of them still have a two-layered authority structure: the all-powerful (but “generous”) CEO at the top, and everyone else below (Foss & Klein, 2022; Martela, 2023). Indeed, the promises of organizing without any hierarchy seem to be difficult to uphold (Lee, 2024; Soetens & Huybrechts, 2023; Storey et al., 2014).

In contrast, new form proponents go to great lengths to show how and why managerial hierarchy can be averted. First, there is the historical argument (as alluded to earlier in section 2.2). According to new form proponents, hierarchical organization is a rather recent socio-cultural innovation when viewed on a larger time scale; some pre-industrial organizing efforts look (surprisingly) similar to what researchers today refer to as “less-hierarchical” or even “non-hierarchical” organizations (Child, 2019; Graeber & Wengrow, 2021; Narayanan et al., 2021).

Furthermore, new form proponents frequently call attention to the downsides of hierarchical organizing. For instance, many say that managerial hierarchy and its inherent centralization hampers flexibility (e.g., Fjeldstad et al., 2012; Pettigrew et al., 2000; Schreyögg & Sydow, 2010) and risks information overload, neglecting the importance of local knowledge (Fjeldstad et al., 2012; Galbraith, 1974; Hayek, 1945; Schreyögg & Sydow, 2010). As such, managerial hierarchy may not reduce uncertainty but rather turn a blind eye to it (cf. Gemmill & Oakley, 1992). Additionally, hierarchical organizations may not be nice places to be—often experienced

as dehumanizing, at least by those not belonging to the leading elite (Blaug, 2009; Petriglieri, 2020b; Resch, 2019). To Diefenbach (2020, p. 4), hierarchical organizations are “miserable” places of “misbehaviour, maltreatment, and injustices”; expressions of “a fundamentally flawed and highly dysfunctional system” that is “rotten to the core”. Some authors say that dividing work into specialized tasks in the name of efficiency creates an artificial need for managerial control and eliminates people’s moral responsibility for their work (Bauman, 1989; Blaug, 2009; Gouldner, 1955; Graeber & Wengrow, 2021; Kraus, 1980). Current-day legal and ownership structures make this unequal distribution of power hard, if not impossible, to break up (cf. Lee, 2024).

Though acknowledging strong pulls towards hierarchy, new form proponents have asserted—both conceptually and empirically—that managerial hierarchy is a malleable socio-cultural phenomenon rather than a structural inevitability (see e.g., Adler, 2022b; Adler & Heckscher, 2018; Cornforth, 1995; Diefenbach, 2019; Graeber & Wengrow, 2021; Lee, 2024; Resch, 2019). As several cases seem to show (see e.g., Laloux, 2014; Parker et al., 2014b), hierarchy as an organizing principle may have become less important (Kanter, 1972; Kühl, 2013; Luhmann, 2000). Even some grand theorists—often drawn upon by those promoting the inevitability of managerial hierarchy—have, in later works, acknowledged the possibilities of organizing beyond managerial hierarchy (Drucker, 1993; Galbraith & Lawler, 1993; Simon, 1962). Hierarchy may be the dominant organizational coordination mechanism—but several authors have shown that it is not the only one at our disposal (Battilana et al., 2022; Child, 2019; Fjeldstad et al., 2012; Hsieh & Vergne, 2023; Luhmann, 2000; Okhuysen & Bechky, 2009).

Amidst the heated debate about hierarchy’s inevitability, a more nuanced view on the matter arises. Following Child’s (2019) definition, hierarchy implies ranked order in a (social) system. Such ranking—though perhaps inevitable in any social system at some point—may not only be based on formal managerial authority, but also for instance on the expertise and initiative people bring to the table in specific situations; hierarchies can become more “responsibility-based”, “natural”, and “dynamic” (Child, 2019; Hamel & Zanini, 2020; Laloux, 2014; Romme, 2021). As such, we might be better off viewing *managerial* hierarchy as a human design choice (Diefenbach, 2019, 2020; Resch, 2019). Hierarchy seems to be a critical success factor for any complex (social) system—though it can take many different forms, not just that of managerial hierarchy (see also Sage, 2024; Selznick, 1994; Simon, 1962). In short, hierarchy may be inevitable but *managerial* hierarchy is not.

3.3.2. *Are new forms structureless?*

A commonly mentioned caveat of new organizational forms is the perception that they entail the elimination of all structures, with bosses making themselves redundant by declaring full self-organization and individual autonomy—a recipe for chaos and disaster, according to some (Foss & Klein, 2022). New form skeptics point at Zappos, Medium, and others as “failed” cases, arguing for the inadequacy (or even impossibility) of reducing (or even eliminating) managers and hierarchical structures in organizations (Foss & Klein, 2022; Romme, 2015). Such authors regard managerial hierarchy—with its formalized structures and rules—as beneficial rather than detrimental in an uncertain and complex world. Indeed, organization—and by extension,

hierarchy—is seen by many as a necessary mechanism for managing uncertainty and complexity (Alexy, 2022; Child, 2019; Jaques, 1990; Luhmann, 2000; Zhou, 2013).

In contrast, proponents claim that new organizational forms do not imply absence of any structure, or even a lack of any organization (e.g., Bernstein et al., 2016; Kokkinidis, 2015; Parker et al., 2014a). Structure is not inherently bad (Freeman, 1972); it both reflects and enables local action and meaning-making (Ciborra et al., 1984; Giddens, 1984). As several authors claim, structured rules and routines can also foster (rather than impede) flexibility, innovation, and autonomy (Adler & Borys, 1996; Farjoun et al., 2015; Selznick, 1994)—especially when they emerge naturally and remain open for future change (Shanahan, 2023; Wheatley & Kellner-Rogers, 1996a). Proper flexibility, innovation, and autonomy may require certain levels of (structural) guidance and support (Gagné & Hewett, 2025a; Gulati, 2018).

A reduction in formal structures may indeed spur an increase in procedural and/or normative rules closer to the work (Barker, 1993; Bechky, 2006). Certain new organizational forms, like Holacracy, seem to imply more (rather than less) formal structures and procedures (Bernstein et al., 2016; Farkhondeh & Müller, 2021). Some authors even see codified, formalized rules and practices as defining features of new, “self-managing” organizational forms (Lee & Edmondson, 2017; Salovaara et al., 2024). Explicit, written rules can make an organization more (rather than less) democratic and inclusive (Shanahan, 2023; see also Ostrom, 2011). As such, new organizational forms are not “structureless”; “self-organization” does not imply that they organize themselves. In fact, there may be “nothing as designed as an effective self-organizing process” (Felin & Powell, 2016, p. 92). Several authors claim that for self-organization to succeed, cultivating conditions for interaction—perhaps even structural—need to be created (Smith & Graetz, 2006; Tonellato et al., 2024; Wenger & Snyder, 2000). As per Selznick (1994), structure seems necessary to make organization(s) work, but no structure could ever account for, or even substitute, the complexity and interdependence of human relationships.

3.3.3. *Does this only work in small service firms?*

Many scholars are skeptical about the prospects of “new organizational forms” outside small service firms (see e.g., Cunha et al., 2022; Foss & Klein, 2022). In terms of organizational size, authors often point to some version of “Dunbar’s number” (e.g., Dunbar, 2010) which identifies a cognitive limit in terms of the number of stable social relationships a human being can uphold, placing it at 150; no effective organization without managerial hierarchy can exist (far) beyond said threshold, scholars say (Cunha et al., 2022; Foss & Klein, 2022; see also Narayanan et al., 2021). It seems intuitive that coordination of collective action gets more complex as the number of people involved increases. Organizing a weekend getaway (when, where, how) with three people? Easy. Do so with 30 people? Difficult.

In terms of organizational type, there indeed seems to be an overrepresentation of software and professional services firms among cases of new organizational forms (see e.g., Fjeldstad et al., 2012; Kolbjørnsrud, 2018; Lindgren & Packendorff, 2006). The relatively high skill and education levels of their employees, the low degree of standardization in their services, as well as low interdependence between teams often found in such firms seem to establish

exceptionally favorable contingencies for new forms, difficult to find in other environments (Martela, 2019; see also Alvesson & Lindkvist, 1993).

That said, some of the most popular cases within the new forms discussion—Semco, Morning Star, W.L. Gore, Haier, Mondragón, and Buurtzorg—call these contingencies into question. All these organizations employ thousands of people (Haier even more than 100,000); the first five are manufacturing-based firms; Buurtzorg works in healthcare services. Morning Star, for instance, produces processed tomato products, providing a counterexample to the “high-skilled employees, low-standardized products only”-argument. According to new form proponents, these and other examples underline that the power of self-organization can unfold in any type of organization (Wheatley & Kellner-Rogers, 1996b). As Kraus (1980) argued, increased organizational size and complexity might call for less rather than more hierarchy. In that regard, Graeber and Wengrow (2021, p. 297) outline several examples of highly complex, sizable pre-industrial societies and economies which were “highly egalitarian”, demonstrating that “there is no reason to assume that such a system would only work on a small scale”. As new form proponents contend, alternatives to bureaucratic/hierarchical organization exist in the here and now, and have been around for a long time (Battilana & Beckman, 2025; Graeber & Wengrow, 2021; Vijay et al., 2025).

3.3.4. *Are new forms really that new?*

To skeptics, the rhetoric around new organizational forms seems heavily inflated. To them, ever-new labels for supposedly “new” forms are just being put on “old wine in new bottles” (Foss & Klein, 2022; Kühl, 2020). Though the labels have changed over time, the content has largely remained the same, they say (Farkhondeh & Müller, 2021; Kühl, 2022). Many of the new form “poster children” might not be as “less-hierarchical”, “self-managing”, and/or “agile”—as “new”—as scholars widely claim (Foss & Klein, 2022). They certainly are not completely “boss-less”, given their strong dependence on prominent CEO-leaders (Foss & Klein, 2022; Martela, 2023). For instance, it seems questionable how Haier’s approach of aggressive internal competition and controlling “everything, everyone, and every day” (Frynas et al., 2018) fits into the self-organization rhetoric. Similarly, the Basque Mondragón cooperative—perhaps *the* go-to case for alternative organization and democratic co-determination—has been “myth-busted” for retracting its supposedly alternative principles and practices in considerable parts of its operations (Heras-Saizarbitoria, 2014; Heras et al., 2024).

As implied by Kühl (2020), “new organizational forms” may not only be interpreted as emancipations from managerial hierarchy; new forms may alternatively be viewed as attempts to bring the “informal”—the inevitably “unmanaged” (Gabriel, 1995) dimensions, the “self-organization” (Kühl, 2020) escaping formal rules and oversight in any organization—under (disguised) managerial (or at least normative) control. New organizational forms may hence entail a (subtle) return to CEO-leaders with charismatic authority (du Gay, 2000)—a form of authority which “recognizes no authority but its own” (du Gay, 2000, p. 70) and was thought to be left to the past by bureaucracy and its legal-rational authority (Weber, 1922). Positioning autonomy, meaning, and fulfillment as moral imperatives, new organizational forms and their leaders may hide organizational (and societal) issues while turning them into requirements for individuals’ self-optimization (Cederström & Spicer, 2015; du Gay, 2000); the problem is not

the organization—it is the individual. The “enlightened oligarchs”¹⁶ leading “less-hierarchical”, “self-managing”, and “agile” organizations often call for unquestioned obedience to the organization’s “mission” or “purpose” which promises individual fulfillment; the mission becomes the religion, the organization becomes the church, and the founder/CEO becomes the preacher (cf. du Gay, 2000).

Once looking beyond the scope of the prototypical industrial business corporation, even the most radically “new” organizational forms might be nothing more than “combinations and permutations of what was there before” (Padgett & Powell, 2012, p. 2; see also Graeber & Wengrow, 2021). There certainly seems to be some “new-washing” going on in the (scholarly¹⁷) debate about “new” organizational forms (cf. EL Khoury et al., 2024). This seems particularly true for those organizations aspiring to be “less-hierarchical”, with several researchers showing how many such organizations have later returned to a more hierarchical design (Diefenbach & Sillince, 2011; Foss, 2003; Foss & Dobravska, 2015; Foss & Klein, 2022; Romme, 2015).

Some new form proponents disagree though: Yes, their degree of newness might be overestimated, but there still seems to be something going on which requires further investigation and new (theoretical) explanations (e.g., Billinger & Workiewicz, 2019; Child & McGrath, 2001; Walsh et al., 2006). Beneath the faddish rhetoric, proponents say, there are clear glimpses of a substantial shift. Some contemporary organizing seems to entail profoundly different challenges, principles, and practices—hence “new organizational forms” relate to a “new” phenomenon worth investigating (e.g., Felin & Powell, 2016; Zenger & Hesterly, 1997).

3.3.5. *Is there anything bad about new forms?*

At Valve, one of the most popular cases in the new forms discourse, an employee handbook famously welcomes new hires to “flatland” (Valve, 2012). The journey towards flatland might be tough, but to new form proponents, paradise awaits on the other side of the river; a land of endless autonomy, purpose, and fulfillment. To Diefenbach (2020, p. 164), new democratic organizations “are better, do better, and perform better”—they are “inherently good”.

Recently however, increasing skepticism has arisen, indicating that such unwavering excitement about the utopian promises of flatland hides possible dark sides (Foss & Klein, 2022; Resch, 2019). The arguably most substantiated claim in that regard is that normative and/or affective control mechanisms frequently rule inside new organizational forms, putting human action under scrutiny in more informal and subtle—yet possibly more pervasive—ways than under formal managerial supervision (Barker, 1993; de Vaujany et al., 2021; Kärreman & Alvesson, 2004; Kokkinidis, 2015; Resch et al., 2021; Rothschild-Whitt, 1979). Employees feel obliged to work long and perform well because that is what their peers do, what their profession requires. Some scholars indicate that collectivist, self-managing organizations recruit for homogeneity, risking exclusion of those with deviating backgrounds or opinions (Battilana et al., 2022; Rothschild-Whitt, 1979; Soetens & Huybrechts, 2023). Others point towards the conflicts, costs, and complexities new organizational forms may stir (Foss & Klein, 2022; Kühl,

¹⁶ This is a phrasing used by Frank Martela in a conference paper presented at EGOS 2024.

¹⁷ I will argue throughout this thesis that the same holds true for many practitioners and consultants.

2020). As such, the idea of “self-management” may be no better than previous promises of “participative management” or “organizational democracy”, implicitly promoting the perpetuation of existing power structures rather than substantially challenging them (cf. Kokkinidis, 2015; Kraus, 1980; Lee & Edmondson, 2017).

Beyond that, scholars have called out new forms for ignoring or even suppressing possible resemblances to traditional bureaucracy and managerial hierarchy. In our new organizational form, surely nobody would ever work because of material gains (or would they?, Rothschild-Whitt, 1979); surely there is no hierarchy in our organization whatsoever (or is there?, Resch & Steyaert, 2020); we surely have no influential leaders (or do we?, Foss & Klein, 2022). Consequently, new organizational forms and their common aspirations for autonomy, purpose, and fulfillment at work may be read as romantic, quasi-religious aspirations extending far beyond the moral grounds of traditional organizational forms (cf. du Gay, 2000).

Overall, there is reason to doubt whether simply declaring everybody’s autonomy and articulating a shared, “good” purpose to be jointly pursued is a recipe for organizational success (Alvesson & Lindkvist, 1993; Felin & Powell, 2016; Foss & Klein, 2022). Increased individual autonomy implies increased responsibility, requiring skills and engagement from employees which do not seem in high demand within bureaucratic, hierarchical organizations (Soetens & Huybrechts, 2023). As some scholars note, not everything might be great about “new” forms, and not everything might be bad about “traditional” forms either (see e.g., Adler & Borys, 1996; du Gay, 2000; Foss & Klein, 2022; Monteiro & Adler, 2022).

3.4. The need for an alternative perspective

Following the elaborations in this chapter, the state of the scholarly discourse about “new organizational forms” can be diagnosed with three main insufficiencies: lack of *nuance*, lack of *imagination*, and lack of *practical relevance*.

First, heated debates between critics and proponents of new forms (see section 3.3) leave little room for *nuanced* arguments. What do people actually mean—and *not* mean—when they call an organizational form “less-hierarchical”, “self-managing”, and/or “agile”? Given their inconsistent and non-exclusive uses, the theoretical and practical value of such labels remains questionable (EL Khoury et al., 2024; Foss, 2002; Palmer et al., 2007). Both in practice and research, the boundaries between “self-managing” teams and “self-managing” organizations, between “less-hierarchical” and “non-hierarchical”, between “new organizational forms” and “new ways of working” seem unclear (see e.g., de Vaujany et al., 2021; Laloux, 2014; Lee et al., 2023). What makes the newest trend, the newest label, different from the previous? We could arguably make more refined arguments about different “new organizational forms”—their characteristics, possibilities, and desirabilities—if we moved beyond whataboutisms and idealizations.

Second, in extant theorizing the “new” remains largely discussable and *imaginable* within the confines of a structuralist paradigm. Labels such as *post-bureaucratic*, *less-hierarchical*, *self-managing*, or *de-centralized* arguably blind us from possible alternative, other-than-structural understandings and solutions of organization (Alexander, 2022; Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1993; Child, 2019; Jensen & Mikkelsen, 2024; Schüßler et al., 2021). Although challenged by the

new forms, idea(l)s of bureaucracy and hierarchy, of managers and leaders, of centralization—long “reified” (Blaug, 2009; Gemmill & Oakley, 1992) and turned into “self-fulfilling prophecies” (Ferraro et al., 2005) in most organizational thinking and practice—continue to prime and constrain how we organize (see e.g., Diefenbach, 2019; Graeber & Wengrow, 2021; Köhl, 2020; Mintzberg, 2023; Rothschild-Whitt, 1979). Underselling the “social context” (Zack & McKenney, 2009), the “clearly relational nature” (Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1993), the “principles, values, and purposes” (Pietinalho & Martela, 2024) of contemporary organization(s), a structuralist paradigm does not seem adequate for capturing the intricacies and possibilities of organizing, especially in today’s world (Child & McGrath, 2001; Ilinitich et al., 1996; Livijn, 2019; Mandalaki & Fotaki, 2020; Meyer & Höllerer, 2014; Selznick, 1994). As such, the new forms discourse seems stuck in extant conceptual language (Cabantous et al., 2016; Daft & Lewin, 1993; Graeber & Wengrow, 2021; Kornberger, 2022); it allows to identify the bureaucratic procedures and hierarchical structures new forms seem to be moving *away* from, but not to *imagine* what they might be moving *towards* (see also Vijay et al., 2025). Structures matter in organization(s), but organization is about more than just structures (Freeman, 1972; Martela, 2019; Selznick, 1994). Possible (structural) contingencies for new organizational forms should not prevent from imagining and exploring what these new forms may be and what they could help us do (see also Parker et al., 2007).

Finally, the scholarly discourse about “new organizational forms” seems to lack *practical relevance*. By and large, bureaucracy and managerial hierarchy continue to prevail in most organizations to this day, with “new organizational forms” being an emerging exception to the rule (Diefenbach, 2019; Foss & Klein, 2022; Lee, 2024; Monteiro & Adler, 2022). Even among those to whom the promises of “less-hierarchical”, “self-managing”, and/or “agile” organizing sound appealing (Lee & Edmondson, 2017; Madsen, 2020), many seemingly struggle to fulfil and sustain their new form ambitions, with frequent reports of coordination issues and eventual returns to more traditional bureaucratic procedures and hierarchical structures (Bernstein et al., 2016; de Vaujany et al., 2021; Foss & Klein, 2022; Rigby et al., 2020; Romme, 2015). Practitioners within and beyond the NWoW movement long for guidance on how and under what conditions they can make “new organizational forms” work in practice (see also Joseph & Sengul, 2025). They commonly find such guidance in the interpretations, recommendations, and frameworks offered to them by consultants and management gurus (see e.g., Hamel & Zanini, 2020; Laloux, 2014; Minnaar & de Morree, 2019), who are (unsurprisingly) keen on selling their own (often simplified and romanticized) versions of the “new”. Amidst the ever-thickening jungle of “new organizational forms”, are we perhaps missing profound practical insights—profound changes in how humans (can) organize—between and beyond the different hypes (Hamel & Zanini, 2020)? Conversely, are we perhaps overhyping the “new” and discarding “traditional” approaches prematurely from our contemporary organizing repertoire (cf. Alvesson & Spicer, 2025; du Gay, 2000; Foss & Klein, 2022; Graeber & Wengrow, 2021; Monteiro & Adler, 2022)?

Identifying these three insufficiencies of the current discourse about “new organizational forms”, the essential point¹⁸ of this thesis is that our understanding of new forms could become

¹⁸ Some might say that this is the “point of the point”.

more nuanced, imaginative, and practically relevant if we re-framed the discourse based on alternative, more critical perspectives (cf. Resch, 2019). One such alternative perspective shall be proposed in this thesis, intending to culminate in a “reparative critique” (Alvesson & Spicer, 2025; Sedgwick, 1997) of the “new organizational forms” discourse. What could we see and do about “new organizational forms” beyond their degree of hierarchicalness, managerialism, and/or agility?

In summary, chapter 3 scrutinized the discourse about “new organizational forms”, criticizing it for adopting a vague and fuzzy core concept as well as for being stuck between idealizations by proponents of the heroic “new” forms and whataboutisms by advocates of the villainous “traditional” forms. While “new organizational forms” seem to move *away* from managerial hierarchy, it remains largely unclear from the extant discourse what they are moving *towards*—what certain new organizational forms actually entail. This chapter articulated the need for an alternative perspective which can support researchers and practitioners to understand (and design) “new organizational forms” in more nuanced, imaginative, and practically relevant ways.

4. Method

4.1. Development of research interests

Before describing the studies included in this thesis and respective methodological choices, a brief contextualization of how my research interests have developed is due. With the start of my PhD student journey in February 2021, my work was embedded into a broader research project interested in the design of so-called “agile organizations”, with an established collaboration with a case organization from the automotive industry. Also, based on my main supervisor’s research expertise and interests, this PhD research project was originally framed from an innovation management perspective—a perspective which was not unfamiliar to me, given that I did my master’s studies in innovation management. From the start of my PhD project, we established bi-weekly discussion meetings around the project between my two supervisors (who I am co-authoring three papers included in this thesis with) and me. These meetings proved crucial for reflecting on and developing emerging research insights, conceptual ideas, and writings.

In the initial months of my research, studying the pre-defined empirical setting (study A) took precedence, though I also read back into innovation management literature while further consulting mainstream literature on contemporary organization design generally and agile organizations specifically. As I extended my literature intake and reflected upon emerging insights from my empirical study, I grew increasingly confused by the variety of concepts and their use. What did people actually mean when they talked about “new organizational forms”, like “self-managing”, “less-hierarchical”, “agile” organizations? What, if anything, was the difference between these and other labels? In my initial empirical study, all these adjectives had been used by employees to describe their experience of the case organization. In certain research articles, these adjectives were used as interchangeably as by some interviewees. There seemed to be something special, something “new” about organizations which academics broadly discussed under the notion of “new organizational forms”, but what was it, *really*? Moving my attention from the narrower “agile organizations” to the broader “new organizational forms” notion, I re-shaped the phenomenon of interest for my research. Thereby, I moved somewhat away from (innovation) management literature, more towards organization studies and the community interested in “new organizational forms”.

At this point, I decided to commence a literature review on “new organizational forms” (study B). I finalized the initial analysis for this literature review in November 2024, with the initial empirical study (study A) continuing to demand most of my attention in years 2021 through 2023. Next to my study of academic literature, I decided to immerse myself more deeply in the broader practitioner discourse around new organizational forms (study C). How did practitioners—beyond my initial case organization—talk about new forms, and how did that reflect what academics said? This study accompanied me throughout my entire PhD studies since (though at comparatively lower intensity most of the time).

4.2. Overview of studies

This thesis aims to propose an alternative perspective for understanding “new organizational forms” in more nuanced, imaginative, and practically relevant ways. This research aim and the

related research questions looking into the coordination (RQ1) and conceptualization (RQ2) of new organizational forms are approached through three distinct studies: an empirical study centered around a single case organization (study A), a review of academic literature (study B), and a study of the practitioner discourse (study C). These three studies—all qualitative in nature¹⁹—informed each other throughout the research process, constantly moving between the realms of abstraction, practice, and discourse (cf. Dubois & Gadde, 2002; Sætre & van de Ven, 2021). An overview of how the studies connect to the papers and research questions included in this thesis is provided in Figure 2 below. These links become more apparent in the further description of the studies (see sections 4.3 to 4.5) as well as the papers (see chapter 5).

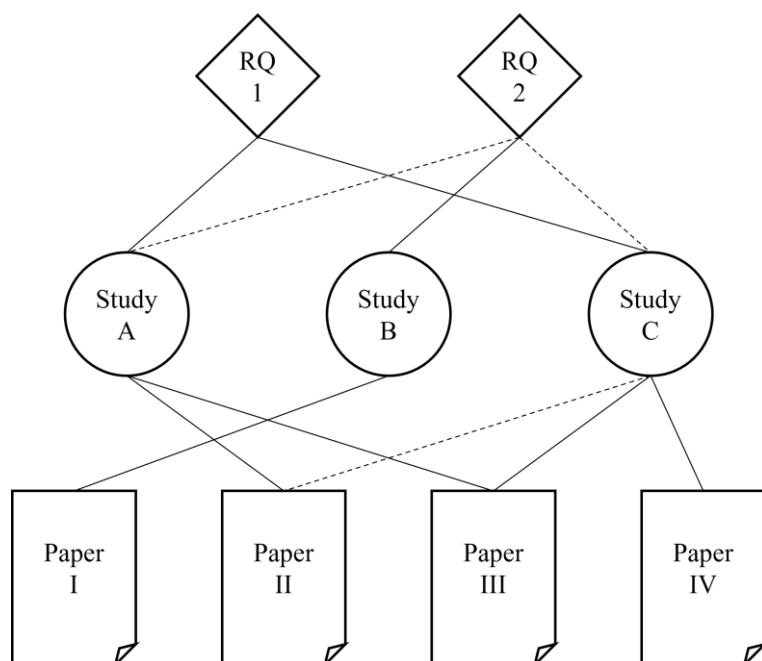


Figure 2: Connection between studies, papers, and research questions. Dotted lines indicate more indirect relationships between items.

4.3. Study A: Zenseact (empirical study)

4.3.1. Empirical context

Study A was designed as an in-depth, longitudinal case study (Yin, 2014) of Zenseact, a Swedish company developing a software platform for autonomous vehicles. I followed the organization throughout my entire PhD process, though most intensely in the years 2021 to 2023. My empirical work with Zenseact is embedded into a larger study, with my main supervisor having followed Zenseact’s journey since the company was formed in 2017.

Zenseact presents itself as a rich and extreme case to study within the “new organizational forms” context, for three reasons. First, Zenseact operates within an extremely uncertain and complex organizational environment. Autonomous driving technologies, such as those developed by Zenseact, are set to radically change mobility services and related infrastructures (Greenblatt & Saxena, 2015; Lee et al., 2016). Given the immense technological, legal, and

¹⁹ Study A and B also encompassed some quantitative analyses (e.g., analyzing survey data, bibliographic analyses), though these only served to support insights from qualitative analyses.

economic uncertainty and complexity involved in developing an autonomous vehicle (Brodsky, 2017; Macfarlane & Stroila, 2016; Taeihagh & Lim, 2019), participating in this race to market entry truly presents a “high risk–high reward” scenario (Davies, 2021). The aspect of safety is critical to Zenseact’s success: If its software fails, people can die. If its software performs well, people’s lives can be saved. This makes effective coordination between organizational units even more complex and critical than it generally is given the strong interdependence of software modules on its platform.

Second, Zenseact is extreme from an organization design perspective. In April 2017, Swedish car manufacturer Volvo Cars and car safety provider Autoliv joined forces with the intention to form a “world leader in autonomous driving safety systems” (Volvo Car Corporation, 2017) through creating a 50–50 joint venture—then under the name of Zenuity. Around 100 employees each were brought in from the respective mother companies to kick off the venture. At that time, the organization could essentially be designed from scratch. The top management support, the cultural setting, the resources—everything was in place to make for a truly “agile” organization (or so it seemed); a new organizational form on steroids.

In designing Zenuity, top management envisioned a truly “agile” organization in all aspects of its organization design. While also drawing some inspiration from other management ideas such as the Spotify model (Kniberg, 2014) or Holacracy (Robertson, 2015), the “Zenuity way” of agile was inspired mostly by the principles of the Agile Manifesto (Beck et al., 2001). Accordingly, people were put into “self-managing” teams, with the teams enjoying great autonomy regarding their ways of working. Teams could decide on their own software setup, their own programming languages, their own (agile) methods and practices. An internal software tool called “Zeniverse” was implemented to depict the organization’s design as an open space with atoms (teams) floating around freely, gravitating towards the different planets (areas) they were circling around. Almost all employees were referred to as “team members”, only a few as “coaches”, and nobody as “manager” or “vice president”. Any similarity with the traditional “hierarchical”, pyramidal view of organizations and associated rigidity was intentionally avoided. Rather, the organization was founded on the assumption of change and uncertainty being inevitable and hence to be embraced rather than to be avoided. Efforts at the company were (and still are) guided by the organization’s purpose of “Towards zero faster”, envisioning a future with zero fatalities from car accidents, as well as the company’s motto of “People at heart”, clarifying its purpose and making daily work at Zenseact more human-centered.

Recruiting mostly from universities and software companies (both established firms and startups), Zenuity grew to employ around 800 people in less than three years. Several ownership changes took place—the most standout one leading to the split of Zenuity in July 2020, with Volvo Cars taking assets and people with it to proceed with their work on an autonomous driving software platform through a new legal entity called Zenseact. Several re-organizations were initiated across the years, one of the more significant ones in March 2021. Since then, Zenseact largely adopted recommendations from SAFe, the so-called “Scaled Agile Framework”, a popular blueprint for agile software development particularly within the automotive industry. The adoption of SAFe is representative of an increasing (re)discovery of hierarchical structures over time at Zenseact. Throughout later re-organizations, Zenseact

increasingly moved away from SAFe and its associated structures (such as the dual leadership model), though keeping its basic structure around agile release trains (ARTs). Meanwhile, the so-called “BAPO model” (cf. Olsson & Bosch, 2016) became an increasingly prominent inspiration for Zenseact’s organization design. The presence of hierarchy, though, became further intensified rather than toned down.

Finally, the duration and depth of access to the case stands out. Within the broader research project that this PhD research was embedded into, the organization design journey of Zenuity/Zenseact has been followed since the company was formed in 2017. When I commenced my research endeavor in early 2021, I could therefore benefit from access to existing empirical material and insights as well as my supervisor’s existing relationships with members of the organization. Specifically, I could enter the company with admission levels of an employee (without getting paid), offering me an entryway to internal systems, communication channels, and offices. More than the formal access though, employees at Zenseact proved very open to contributing to my study in various ways (more on that in the following sub-section). Overall, I could see the organization’s design as well as employees’ experiences and perspectives evolve over time—in real time since early 2021.

4.3.2. *Empirical material*

As part of this study, a variety of empirical material was collected. The initial focus of the study was on interviews. As familiarity with the empirical context increased and relationships with people employed at the organization developed, observations and archival data were increasingly explored as well. Altogether, the empirical material collected stretches across different points of view, different points in time, and different types of media, hence allowing for rich engagement with the empirical context.

Interviews. 37 interviews were conducted with 29 individual participants. All interviews were bilateral conversations (between one interviewer and one interviewee), were semi-structured in nature (Kvale, 2008), and lasted between 20 and 75 minutes (most of them around 60 minutes). All interviews were followed by a brief individual reflection by the interviewer on how the interview went, what stood out about the interview, and what could be improved for future interviews. Over time, these reflections moved from spoken and tape-recorded to written form. All interviews were fully transcribed. Most of the transcripts were prefabricated with the help of auto-transcription software (Otter.ai or Microsoft Teams) and then reviewed manually.

Beyond these interviews, several informal conversations were held with various employees at Zenseact, enriching the overall understanding of the empirical setting. Within the larger study on Zenseact, more than 100 additional interviews were conducted by other researchers. For reasons of confidentiality, transcripts to most of these additional interviews (except for 22 interviews) were accessible to the main supervisor of this PhD project only.

The 37 interviews described above were carried out in multiple waves between February 2021 and April 2023. Due to initial circumstances regarding COVID-19, interviews were conducted online via Microsoft Teams or Zoom and recorded directly within the respective software. This routine was kept for all interviews, thereby increasing flexibility for both the interviewer and

interviewees, with most interviewees working from home on a regular basis even before the COVID-19 pandemic.

Considering their possible influence on how interviews are being interpreted (Gabriel, 2017), more details on the setting and framing of interviews are provided. A first round of 13 interviews was conducted within the first one and a half months of this PhD research. Initial interview participants were recommended by the main point of contact at the case organization for this research project, with the point of contact's ambition to ensure a "representative sample". In this initial round, participants were invited to the interview via email, with a one-pager PDF document attached to explain the context and purpose of the study as well as anticipate potential questions about the interview (duration, format, confidentiality, etc.). Within the one-pager, Zenseact was framed as a "large-scale agile organization", and the interview was framed as being interested in "how Zenseact works as a company, and how employees have experienced the recent organizational changes happening within Zenseact". For the interviews themselves, a generic interview guide for the interviewer was prepared, specifying how the study and interview should be introduced to participants, listing potential questions to be asked (some of them highlighted as "must-have" questions), and anticipating potential themes for follow-up questions. The interview guide was adapted throughout the entire study.

At the end of all interviews of the initial round, interviewees were asked to recommend participants for future interviews. For future interview rounds, hence, potential participants were selected based on snowballing. The selection of interviewees followed different rationales as the study evolved. Overall, the ambition was to interview people with diverse perspectives—different roles, different professional backgrounds, different tenures, and so on. Also, the ambition was to re-interview some interviewees (to follow their emerging experiences and perspectives over time) while adding new interviewees (and thereby, new experiences and perspectives).

For the second round of interviews, the selection was still largely limited to the pool of previous interviewees and their recommendations as well as the aforementioned "selection criteria". Potential participants were, from now on, approached via Slack, Zenseact's preferred tool for internal communication. The framing of the study and interview were adapted over time, gradually moving away from the notion of a "large-scale agile organization" and instead using expressions like researching "Zenseact from an organizational perspective" or "organization design and ways of working". Further information, as previously provided through the one-pager, was now only provided upon request.

As my understanding of both the organization and the academic literature grew, future interview rounds became more targeted at specific topics, organizational groups, or even individual participants. For instance, one round of interviews was focused around one specific area—or "Agile Release Train" (ART) in the language of SAFe—within Zenseact's Engineering function and employees' experiences during PI planning days, a routinized practice for planning and coordinating work during "program increments" as prescribed by the SAFe methodology, recurring every twelve weeks at Zenseact at the time.

Observations. First, selected events and meetings were observed, with observations designed to accompany and deepen insights gained from interviews. The above-mentioned instance of the PI planning routine, for example, was not only captured through interviews but also (and especially) through extensive observations of related meetings. Concretely, I followed two full days of meetings—from individual teams’ meetings over ART-wide meetings to “leadership only”-meetings—in a virtual setting via Microsoft Teams. After prior discussion about my presence as an observing researcher with a member of the ART’s leadership team, my presence was briefly introduced in the kickoff meeting for the PI planning days. Trying to stay a silent observer throughout (with my camera turned off), I only made myself heard on a few occasions when explicitly called upon by meeting participants. Overall, meetings and events were observed for a total duration of more than 30 hours—most of them in a virtual setting. The focus of observation was on what people did and said, and the social dynamics that emerged. I took extensive field notes during the observations, reviewing and reflecting upon them later the same day or the day after. When accompanied by interviews, insights from observations served as input for discussion points during the interviews.

Beyond observations of meetings and events, conversations and discussions were observed on Slack, Zenseact’s main tool for internal communication. Zenseact’s Slack workspace regularly has more than 800 weekly active users who send about 80,000 messages a month. In the workspace’s more than 1,000 active public channels, millions of messages are openly available to be retrieved. Conversations commonly held behind closed doors are visible to all employees at Zenseact, unfolding in real time on the company’s Slack workspace. Channels such as “#whine”, “#satisfaction”, or “#ask-zlt-anything” encourage people to share their emotions, ideas, and opinions freely, even with Zenseact’s executive leadership team (ZLT). At Zenseact, people publicly ask for more transparent decision-making, cry out about short-notice work requests, or praise colleagues for a job well done—and other people react, with open discussions emerging. The resulting empirical material is (arguably) more authentic than otherwise produced (such as through interviewing employees or observing their meetings and events). Notes and screenshots of standout discussions in Slack were produced throughout the entire PhD process, contributing to the identification of central debates and possible interviewees as well as to the development of research ideas and arguments.

Archival data. Supporting the insights generated from interviews and observations are interpretations of archival data. To contextualize my emerging understanding, I reviewed company-internal documents like PowerPoint presentations, strategy documents, and training materials. Given my level of access to the case organization, most of these documents I could access without the need for sharing or permission—available directly from Zenseact’s intranet or Confluence pages.

4.3.3. *Analysis*

The empirical material was analyzed following an abductive approach, constantly moving between what I saw and heard at the case organization, what academic literature had to say, and what practitioners discussed more broadly (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). Even when diving into the empirical realm very early into your research, as I did, you can never look at the emerging material without pre-conceptions and pre-understandings. Analysis is always a matter of

selection, framing, and interpretation—it is always subjective (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011b; Alvesson & Sandberg, 2023). Below I will explain some of the choices I made in that regard.

After the first batch of 13 interviews had been conducted, I thematically analyzed the resulting data through open coding in the software tool NVivo. Theoretically reflecting on the emerging list of codes, the notion of tensions (Putnam et al., 2016; Smith & Lewis, 2011) appeared as an intriguing lens for further coding of this and future data. This lens was adopted in selecting the empirical material and initial framing for paper II. The thematic analysis and coding for paper II was focused on the 32 interviews I conducted until the end of 2022. We selectively drew upon further empirical material from my observations and archival data as well as additional interviews from the broader study on Zenseact to strengthen and refine the development of our arguments.

Apart from this specific coding process, I developed a particular interest in some of the concrete challenges and particularities related to how work was carried out and experienced at Zenseact. Many of these could only insufficiently be explained within the traditional management paradigm or by emerging theories on “new organizational forms”. How do you make decisions when there is nobody calling the shots? How can employees get a sense of development when there is no career ladder to be climbed? Is an organization “agile”, “less-hierarchical”, or “self-managing” just because it says so?

These challenges and particularities are not unique to Zenseact—they closely resemble what is being discussed within the broader NWoW practitioner movement. Beyond forming the empirical basis for paper II and III, reflections on empirical material collected from the Zenseact case hence also served as inspiration for paper IV. Altogether, my study of the Zenseact case showed me that working in a “new organizational form” is more complex and multifaceted than it may seem on the surface.

4.4. Study B: Literature review

In parallel with study A, a literature review study (Cronin & George, 2023; Snyder, 2019) on “new organizational forms” was conducted. This study aimed to clarify the conceptualization of “new organizational forms” in academic literature, targeting RQ2 specifically. On a personal level, I intended for this literature review to address a growing sense of confusion and ambiguity I experienced while reading into the new forms literature. What did researchers *actually* see as “new” when they said, “new organizational forms”? A systematic, inclusive approach to identifying and analyzing literature seemed fitting for this aim. I will keep the description of my literature review approach rather short in this section, referring the interested reader to paper I—being fully based on study B—for a more extensive outline.

The review sample was identified from a systematic search of articles in the Web of Science database, including articles containing “new organizational form” (or related synonyms and variations) in their title, abstract, or keywords. On the initial sample retrieved (1,800 documents), short bibliometric analyses were performed in CitNetExplorer and VOSviewer to get an impression of the literature’s overarching structure—its most prominent keywords, authors, outlets, and streams. Figure 3 shows a citation network with three main streams (clusters) of new organizational forms research developed from the bibliometric analyses. The

most prominent stream (depicted in blue) represents works on organization structure and design, mainly building on economic theory. This cluster—spearheaded by Puranam et al. (2014) as its most prominent contemporary article—builds on the foundational works of Coase (1937), March and Simon (1958), Lawrence and Lorsch (1967), Williamson (1975), as well as Mintzberg (1979). Next, the green stream represents perspectives building on institutional theory, with Stinchcombe (1965), Hannan and Freeman (1977), DiMaggio and Powell (1983) as well as Powell and DiMaggio (1991) offering seminal pieces, and with (hybrid) institutional logics (Battilana & Dorado, 2010) as well as institutional entrepreneurship (Tracey et al., 2011) being prominent conceptual notions in contemporary new forms research. The third main stream (depicted in purple) covers research on “alternative” organizations, represented by Parker et al. (2014a) as its main piece. While the economic and institutional theory streams intersect considerably, research on “alternative” organizations largely draws on a diverse set of theories within *critical management studies* (Adler et al., 2007; Alvesson & Willmott, 1992), with structuration theory (Giddens, 1984) and actor-network theory (Latour, 1987) being most common.

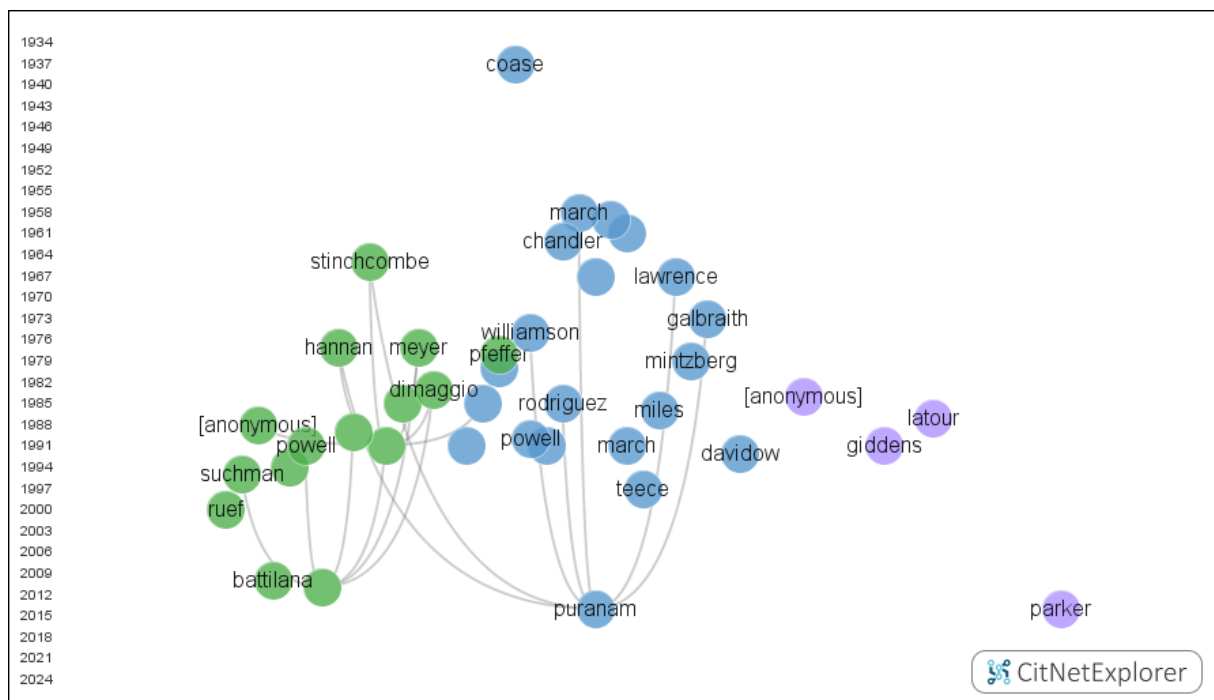


Figure 3: Citation network with three main clusters (source: author)

The review sample was narrowed down to 367 articles through a custom journal filter based on a mix of journal relevance and ranking, to which 46 unique articles were added from a complementary search in the Scopus database. For these 413 articles, titles and abstracts were reviewed and articles excluded in case they did not sufficiently engage with “new organizational form” as a conceptual notion. The remaining 180 articles constituted the final review sample (see Figure 4 for an overview of the literature selection process).

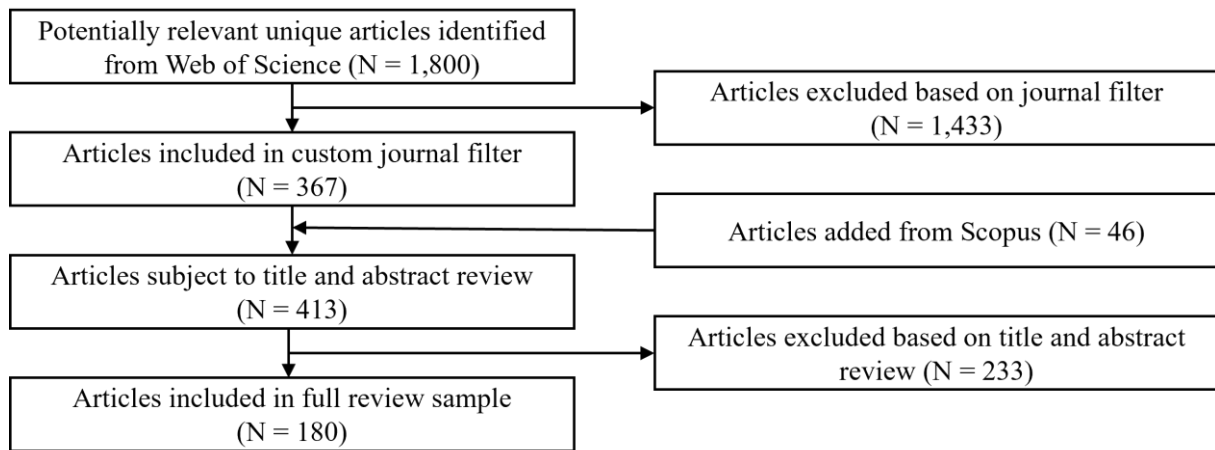


Figure 4: Flow diagram of literature selection process (adapted from paper I)

The analysis of these 180 articles was mainly conducted in NVivo, reading all articles in full and coding them based on analysis dimensions initially developed from a closer reading of selected seminal articles in the “new organizational forms” discussion (Daft & Lewin, 1993; Lee & Edmondson, 2017; Lewin & Volberda, 1999; Palmer et al., 2007; Puranam et al., 2014). The focal point of this analysis was on the features associated with new organizational forms (i.e., what is regarded as “new” about them). The more than 2,500 first-order codes on new form features subsequently underwent two analytical phases: First, the codes were deconstructed into separate dimensions of *elements* (i.e., *what* features are seen as changed compared to established organizational forms) and *operators* (i.e., *how* different features are described to be changing). This dual coding procedure allowed to preserve nuances of new form features, such as “decision-making” (element) being described as “decentralized” (operator) but also “horizontal” or “democratic”, as well as “decentralized” being used to characterize not only “decision-making” but also “information” or “assets”.

Second, the nuanced and deconstructed coding was reconfigured into a heatmap, providing a matrix view of cross-coding instances between different elements and operators. This heatmap then served as a tool for various analyses performed in Microsoft Excel. Across more than 100 Excel sheets, analyses for different levels of abstraction (e.g., all elements or just main element categories), different time periods (e.g., all time or just since 2017), different measurements (e.g., absolute or relative coding presence), and different reference objects (e.g., number of coding instances or number of papers coded) were conducted. These analyses helped identify five main features associated with new organizational forms as well as propose an integrative framework of new forms research as presented in paper I.

4.5. Study C: Study of the practitioner discourse

As a third study, the discourse among practitioners about “new organizational forms”—or, in the practitioners’ preferred terms, about “new ways of working” (NWoW)—was explored. In this thesis, “discourse” is referred to in the everyday sense of the term, meaning “spoken or written communication between people, especially serious discussion of a particular subject” (Collins Dictionary, n.d.). With that, study C does *not* claim to follow the linguistic traditions and analytical depths of organizational discourse analysis (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000; Grant

& Hardy, 2004; Wetherell & Potter, 1988). Rather, study C has a different interest: What is going on in the world of “new organizational forms”? What are people talking about?

To immerse myself in the practitioner discourse, I read popular management books, subscribed to newsletters and blogs, listened to podcasts, became a member of LinkedIn and Slack groups, held personal conversations, and attended a practitioner conference. Initially, I identified relevant resources in the reference lists of academic literature as well as from interviews and other empirical material at Zenseact. Among the most prominent resources identified at this stage were Laloux’s (2014) work on Teal organizations, Robertson’s (2015) Holacracy concept, and Rigby et al.’s (2020) book on agile organizations. Searching for these and related keywords in Google searches led to the discovery of further resources and contexts. Particularly Frederic Laloux (Teal) seemed to be an influential voice among practitioners. Looking for additional content featuring him and his ideas, I identified other influential figures within the practitioner communities. These included founders of pioneering organizations like Ricardo Semler (Semco) and Jos de Blok (Buurtzorg) as well as consultants and commentaries like Joost Minnaar and Pim de Morree (Corporate Rebels), Lisa Gill (Leadmorphosis), and Aaron Dignan (Brave New Work). All of these people have published their own books on new organizational forms (de Blok & Pool, 2010; Dignan, 2019; Minnaar & de Morree, 2019; Semler, 1993; Tenelius & Gill, 2020) and either host or frequently feature in podcasts and blogs. In March 2022, I also attended the “Teal Around the World” (TATW) practitioner conference, featuring many of the aforementioned figures as speakers or participants.

The related books, podcasts, blogs, and speeches of these people cater to their own commercial interests, helping them sell their ideas and services to people and organizations excited about the future of work and organization(s). How they talk and write about “new organizational forms” may hence largely be regarded as polished portrayals, presumably shaped more by their aspirations and image-building concerns than by rigorous scrutiny of new forms and of what happens inside them.

For all my readings and “listenings”, I took notes in an attempt of capturing central themes and insights from the discourse about “new organizational forms”. Departing from these notes and my accompanying impressions, I frequently reflected these themes and insights against what I had read, heard, and seen at Zenseact (study A) and in the academic literature (study B). The most noteworthy of these reflections I brought to my supervisors and co-authors for deeper discussions. Table 1 below provides an overview of resources drawn upon for this study—differentiating between those resources which I read/listened to fully, took extensive notes on, and reflected upon in-depth during discussions in our research project group (main resources), and those which I read/listened to selectively, taking selective notes as the basis for further contextualization of my understanding (supportive resources). Regarding the latter, I followed most newsletters, blogs, and podcasts listed below since June 2021 (some were added as late as April 2022) and selected the content from these resources which I regarded as most relevant to the study, both published before and after that date.

Reflecting on the practitioner discourse, I for instance saw that the same set of case organizations frequently discussed among academics as “self-managing” or “less-hierarchical”—including Valve (Foss & Dobravska, 2015; Puranam & Håkansson, 2015),

Zappos (Bernstein et al., 2016; Romme, 2015), Morning Star (Lee & Edmondson, 2017), and Buurtzorg (Bernstein et al., 2022)—were also seen as pioneers by practitioners, though often with a different point of emphasis. While not uncommonly referring to them as “self-managing organizations”, what practitioners tended to highlight about these organizations were their underlying *principles*, *purpose*, and pioneering *practices*, more so than their decentralized, less-hierarchical, or self-managing *structures*. This perceived discrepancy in descriptions between academics and practitioners, despite looking at the same organizations, became a point of departure for paper IV of this thesis.

Beyond that, insights and reflections from study C also shaped my understanding and interpretation of the empirical material from study A, thereby contributing to the intellectual development of paper II and III as well. For instance, many of the challenges and tensions people experienced at Zenseact, some of which were largely ignored in academic literature, were discussed more frequently among practitioners. Also, insights from study A led me to more thoroughly investigate the discourse surrounding “agile organizations” and its intellectual origins. In the discourse on “agile organizations”, prominent voices include a group of management consultants from Bain & Company (see especially Rigby et al., 2020), and the most prominent sources of inspiration include the original Agile Manifesto (Beck et al., 2001), the Spotify model (Kniberg, 2014), and the Scaled Agile Framework (Scaled Agile Inc., 2021). Related reflections on said discourse, in relation to academic literature and the Zenseact case, particularly contributed to the development of paper III.

Table 1: Overview of resources drawn upon for study C

“New organizational forms” label	Cluster/Source	Main resources	Supportive resources
Less-hierarchical Self-managing Decentralized	Teal	Book (Laloux, 2014) Conference (Teal Around the World, 2022)	Related blogs (Enlivening Edge, Reinventing Organizations, Responsive Org)
	Holacracy	Book (Robertson, 2015)	
	Liberated	Book (Carney & Getz, 2016)	
	Corporate Rebels	Book (Minnaar and de Morree, 2019)	Blog Newsletter Social media Webinars (e.g., Bayer case, DSO)
	Brave New Work	Book (Dignan, 2019)	Newsletter Podcast
	Leadermorphosis/ Tuff		Book (Tenelius & Gill, 2020) Podcast

	New Work	Book (Breidenbach & Rollow, 2019)	Book (Bergmann, 2004)
Agile	Agile Manifesto	Website (https://agilemanifesto.org/)	Personal blog (https://ronjeffries.com/)
	Bain & Company (consulting firm)	Book (Rigby et al., 2020)	Website (https://www.bain.com/insights/topics/agile/)
	Scaled Agile Framework (SAFe)	Website (https://framework.scaledagile.com/)	
	Spotify model		Blog, videos (https://engineering.atspotify.com/2014/03/spotify-engineering-culture-part-1/)

4.6. Reflection on methodological choices

What makes “good” qualitative research? Many would say that good qualitative research departs from a set of clearly articulated convictions about what is real within our world (ontology) and how we as humans come to know about our world (epistemology). While holding such strong convictions is noble, pretending as if these convictions could be fully upheld in everyday research practice might also be naïve (Seale, 1999).

That said, some reflection on my stance and the related methodological choices made throughout my PhD research so far seems due. In investigating “new organizational forms”, it is my understanding that the social world is co-constructed through social interaction (Cunliffe, 2016; Hatch, 1997; Weick, 1995). As such, I view organizations as arenas in which actions and meanings are constantly being negotiated between people (Alvesson et al., 2017; Morgan, 2007; Pettigrew, 1979). It is people, not organizations, who act (Meyer & Höllerer, 2014).

Based on this orientation, I regard “new organizational forms”, both as concept and phenomenon, as shaped by the vocabulary we use to describe them (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011b). When I use the term “new organizational forms”, when I portray labels such as “less-hierarchical”, “self-managing”, and “agile” as describing specific forms within this larger bucket, it is me defining and shaping my own phenomenon. My own experiences, perspectives, and choices have hence inevitably influenced what I study and how I study it—a responsibility I should be reflective about and not take lightly, especially as a social scientist (cf. Ghoshal, 2005).

That does *not* mean, though, that what I call “new organizational forms” is *purely* a construction of my own will and mind. “New organizational forms” become part of the world people experience as they imagine, talk about, and practice them (cf. Selznick, 1994). That said, what qualifies as “organizational”, what constitutes a specific “form”, and whether and how a specific form is “new” seems subjective and contextual. The point of this thesis is *not* to determine definitively what a “new organizational form” is or is not, what it can or cannot be—even if the conceptual orientation of RQ2 and the rather systematic approach of the literature

review study may make it sound like it. The point is, rather, to identify what researchers and practitioners mean when they talk about “new organizational forms”, what assumptions are inherent in their views, and reflect that against organizational practice—thereby pointing at possible alternative interpretations of “the phenomenon”.

After all, theories (and the conceptual language they contain; Stout, 2012) are *not* inevitable. Different theoretical lenses enable us to not only provide different answers but also to raise different questions (cf. Allison, 1971). As such, they serve as important tools for us to better describe and understand the world. In paper II for example, I found the notion of “sensemaking devices” (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Weick, 2012) helpful for capturing how people at Zenseact interpreted and dealt with an “agile”, “self-managing” organization void of hierarchy. This is a theoretical concept *I* used, not the people I interviewed, observed, and followed.

Overall, my methodological choices come with limitations. First, my empirical study (study A) draws solely on qualitative data from a single case organization. Given the extremeness of the Zenseact case, the generalizability of theoretical implications drawn from the case may be perceived as heavily limited. Also relating to the case study, potential effects of COVID-19 need to be acknowledged. The case study is interested in the experiences of organizational life—an organizational life which, from one day to another, moved from the physical to the digital realm. While remote work and digital collaboration were very common to Zenseact’s employees even before the pandemic, potential effects on the way they organized and worked, and how employees experienced it, cannot be neglected. Still, the Zenseact case seems rich in potential insights which could elevate our understanding of new organizational forms—not in an attempt to develop broadly generalizable theory (which is not what case study research should be about; cf. Flyvbjerg, 2006), but to vividly illustrate what it means to work in an organization which aspires to be “self-managing”, “less-hierarchical”, and “agile”.

Looking at the literature review study (study B), the choice of a systematic search approach risks overlooking literature which is relevant despite not employing the anticipated terminology. As such, not all articles thematizing “less-hierarchical”, “self-managing”, “agile”, or other organizational forms were captured in the review sample. That said, the specific interest of the review was in clarifying the meaning of “new organizational form” as an umbrella concept—not in providing an overview of all “new organizational forms” out there.

Finally, with my study of the practitioner discourse (study C) I took an exploratory approach to understanding how people talk about “new organizational forms” through resources like books, podcasts, and blogs. This approach might be criticized for being too removed from the actual experience and practice, relying on second-hand, polished narratives about what makes new forms special. Given the aim and interest of this research, however, this immersion into the discussions around “new organizational forms” amongst practitioners was essential to my understanding of the phenomenon—not least as a reflectional tool to put emerging insights from the other studies into perspective. For instance, study C led to the identification of a discrepancy between different interpretations of organization-level agile (see paper III), and between how academics and practitioners perceive and characterize certain “new organizational forms” (see paper IV).

5. Summary of appended papers

This thesis includes four papers, three of which are co-authored and one of which is single-authored. Table 2 provides an overview of the appended papers and their status (single-authored paper marked with *). The papers and their contributions in the context of this thesis are summarized individually below. The chapter closes with a brief discussion of how the papers (or pieces) fit together.

Table 2: Overview of appended papers

Paper	Title	Status
I*	New organizational forms: Deconstructing and reconfiguring the literature.	Resubmitted after revision for second round of review in <i>European Management Review</i> . Previous versions were presented at EGOS 2024 and AOM 2025.
II	Making sense in “less-hierarchical” forms of organizing.	Published in <i>Scandinavian Journal of Management</i> .
III	Scaling or growing agile? Proposing a manifesto for agile organization development.	Published in <i>Journal of Organization Design</i> .
IV	A philosophy for new ways of working: Insights from Mary Parker Follett.	Under development for journal submission. This version was presented at PROS 2022.

5.1. Paper I

The aim with this literature review paper was to lay the foundation for answering RQ2 by clarifying what researchers mean when they say “new organizational form”. Based on a deconstruction and reconfiguration of 180 scholarly articles and their characterizations of new organizational forms, I offer two contributions to the new forms discussion. First, I identify five main features associated with new organizational forms: community-based organizing, decentralized decision-making authority, self-organizing teams, networking, and flexible work. Second, I propose an integrative framework of new organizational forms research. Integrating perspectives and insights from three main research streams interested in new forms (i.e., economist, institutional, and critical), this framework conceptualizes new forms as discrete configurations of organizational features which differ from established forms, also outlining the main antecedents and outcomes related to the change process of new form emergence. Beyond clarifying the conceptualization of new forms, this paper thereby helps navigating the new organizational forms jungle across labels and traditions.

5.2. Paper II

With this paper, my co-authors and I zoom in on the “less-hierarchical” label by investigating how managerial hierarchy can be replaced. Drawing on the case of Zenseact, we illustrate the struggles it entails putting the conceptual idea(l) of organizing without hierarchy into practice, thereby contributing to both research questions. Overall, this paper underlines that new organizational forms need to be more than just “less-hierarchical” in their structures. Practically, the Zenseact case illustrates the temptation of returning to some version of managerial hierarchy when people search for guidance in everyday organizational life,

highlighting the importance of local meaning-making and related organizational support. Conceptually, our paper questions the usefulness of understanding organizational forms through an exclusively structural lens. With our “sensemaking device” concept, we broaden the discussion on alternatives to managerial hierarchy, illustrating how managerial hierarchy can, and needs to, be replaced not only by structures but also by (a repertoire of) metaphors, narratives, practices, and/or artifacts. More specifically, Zenseact’s “People at heart” motto, as one of its sensemaking devices, hints at the potential of a people-positive perspective on organizing.

5.3. Paper III

This paper enters the discussion surrounding the “agile” label by detecting a divergence between the conceptual idea of “agile” (as originally expressed in the Agile Manifesto) and its common practice in “large-scale agile” organizations. Outlining this divergence along the case of Zenseact and its interpretation of “agile” over time, we provide contributions to both research questions of this thesis. Regarding the conceptualization of new forms (RQ2), we problematize the extant notion of “scaling” agile, showcasing how the assumptions inherent in a “scaling” approach fundamentally oppose the assumptions inherent in the Agile Manifesto as the main intellectual origin of “agile”, implicitly promoting a more traditional, hierarchical organization design logic. In response, we propose an alternative approach of “growing” (rather than “scaling”) agile—one which translates the people-positive and uncertainty-embracing philosophy of the original Agile Manifesto from the world of project management to the world of organization design. Concretely, we develop a Manifesto for Agile Organization Development, outlining values and principles for a “growing” agile approach. These values and principles are both derived from and meant to inform the local practice of (agile) organizing and coordinating at Zenseact and other new form pioneers (cf. RQ1).

5.4. Paper IV

This conceptual paper aims to revitalize our understanding of organizations like Morning Star, W.L. Gore, or Buurtzorg by approaching them from a philosophical (rather than structural) perspective. In existing research, these and other popular cases are used as common examples for new organizational forms characterized by their “less-hierarchical”, “boss-less”, or—most commonly—“self-managing” authority structures. In contrast, people within a practitioner-based movement interested in “new ways of working” (NWoW) discuss the same set of organizations as pioneers in terms of their underlying purpose, practices, and assumptions about people as inherently good in their intentions. In this version of the paper,²⁰ we bring Mary Parker Follett, her relational process ontology, and her assumptions about human beings—her *Menschenbild*—into conversation with the (coordination) practice(s) of the NWoW movement (cf. RQ1) as shared through stories in influential practitioner books. In so doing, we advance an alternative interpretation and conceptual language of certain “new organizational forms” (cf. RQ2). Rather than emphasizing the structures of managerial hierarchy they may be moving

²⁰ A further developed version of this paper (currently under development for journal submission) is (i) considerably less centered around the review of practitioner literature, and (ii) less comprehensive on the philosophical underpinnings of the NWoW movement. Both these aspects are considered crucial to the arguments developed in this thesis, which is why this version (presented at PROS 2022) has been included here.

away from, our proposed interpretation and conceptual language highlight the philosophy new forms may be moving *towards*; a philosophy implying organizational focus on the coordination of people's experiences and the integration of their perspectives.

5.5. How the pieces fit together

This thesis is interested in the conceptualization of “new organizational forms” and the coordination of collective effort within those forms. Beyond their individual contributions, the four appended papers work in interaction to address questions of new form coordination (RQ1) and conceptualization (RQ2). Paper I is the opening piece, framing the overarching phenomenon of “new organizational forms” conceptually. Paper I thereby contextualizes the relevance and contributions of the remaining four papers. For instance, paper I frames and positions various new form labels within the broader new organizational forms discussion. The remaining papers each concentrate on one of these labels—“less-hierarchical” (paper II), “agile” (paper III), and “self-managing” (paper IV)—and, as a result, enter different contexts and streams within the new forms discussion.

The different papers also focus on different “levels” or “objects” of analysis. Paper I reviews the scholarly use of the “new organizational forms” notion, which is most commonly applied at an organizational level. Papers II and III focus on the case of Zenseact as a specific formal organization which exemplifies new organizational forms. Paper IV, in contrast, is interested in a phenomenon/movement. Despite their different analytical foci, the papers are tied together by a shared interest in the relational construction and experience of the “new”. The thesis arguably benefits from this multifaceted approach, taking the formal organization as study object (in papers II and III) yet selectively moving beyond it (especially in paper IV) to allow for a more holistic illumination of the phenomenon (cf. Meyer & Höllerer, 2014).

Despite their focus on one label each, papers II through IV show that, in practice, the use of new form labels is generally elusive and commonly overlapping—an insight already alluded to in paper I. In that regard, paper I hints at the importance of language, narratives, and local meaning-making in the practice of new organizational forms; papers II through IV illuminate and concretize this importance. Beyond that, paper I promotes a (more) critical perspective on organizational form newness and possible discrepancies between concept and practice. Related attempts at questioning the meaning(fulness) of new form labels are prevalent in all remaining papers. Finally, paper I advocates longitudinal studies on new organizational forms, such as the one on Zenseact which formed the basis for paper II and III of this thesis.

If paper I is the opening paper of this thesis, then paper IV is its closing piece. A people-positive perspective on organizing—already teased in the empirical papers II and III—is concretized and bound together in paper IV. In that sense, paper IV paves the way for synthesizing all papers into a common contribution.

6. Coordinating and conceptualizing “new organizational forms” differently

In this chapter, the two research questions of this thesis are being addressed and discussed, attending first to the coordination of collective effort in “new organizational forms” (cf. RQ1) before moving to their conceptualization (cf. RQ2).

6.1. Coordinating collective effort within new organizational forms (RQ1)

6.1.1. *Challenges of coordination in new forms*

Adopting a “new organizational form” is not a straightforward journey but one that can entail several hurdles and complexities. On the surface, organizing in a “less-hierarchical”, “self-managing”, and/or “agile” fashion sounds appealing—but how do you actually *coordinate* collective effort when traditional bureaucratic procedures and hierarchical structures are missing?

In general, opting for a “new organizational form” means taking the hard route (cf. also Anicich et al., 2024; Gagné & Hewett, 2025b). Successfully developing a new form requires substantial effort from everyone involved—“time and energy to be sure, but also cognitive and emotional effort” (Lee, 2024, p. 815). As Study A showed, Zenseact had the top management support, the cultural setting, and the resources at its disposal which would favor a truly less-hierarchical, self-managing, and agile organization—and still it eventually resorted to more traditional hierarchical structures (see paper II). In that regard, it has long been acknowledged that new organizational forms face risks of “reversion” (Foss & Klein, 2022; Romme, 2015) or “degeneration” (Cornforth, 1995; Freeman, 1972; Michels, 1911)—an “iron threat” of oligarchy (Diefenbach, 2019) seems to be constantly looming when aiming to organize differently.

The case of Zenseact generally illustrates how challenging and tension-rich the experience of working inside an aspiring new organizational form can be, particularly when the organization is constantly changing and developing. Study A showed that people at Zenseact struggled to coordinate their work, especially when attending to matters of relevance beyond their individual team (cf. paper III). It remained unclear to many how to navigate everyday work situations: What is up to me as an individual employee to decide, and what requires discussing with other people (and whom)? Which information is relevant to me? How does my work tie into the bigger picture of what Zenseact is developing? In new organizational forms, coordination becomes both more (not less) difficult and more (not less) important (cf. Kühl, 2020). Findings from study A suggest that this challenge has been underestimated at Zenseact.

Strong pulls towards managerial hierarchy—psychological, sociological, and economic (Child, 2019; Diefenbach, 2019; Lee, 2024)—were in effect at Zenseact, as particularly evidenced in paper II. The Organization 2.0 re-organization initiative essentially functioned as a “smokescreen” for the (re-)emergence of hierarchical structures at Zenseact, despite the company’s explicit initial intention to avoid managerial hierarchy. Importantly, this partial return to managerial hierarchy has not been fully acknowledged at Zenseact, with the company often continuing to pride itself for its “less-hierarchical”, “self-managing”, and “agile” approach.

In the company's early days, its avoidance of formal hierarchical structures and traditional job titles only became a problem once communicating beyond organizational boundaries; at trade shows and conferences, Zenseact's "coaches" had a hard time convincing other firms' "vice presidents" that they were of equal (or any) importance. In later days, Zenseact felt the need to clarify relationships between people and teams in a more formal sense also internally, for instance by using traditional pyramidal organization charts to communicate organizational changes. At least on the façade (here, in the form of business cards and email signatures), there seemed to be a ceremonial, cultural need for managerial hierarchy (cf. DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Jermier et al., 1991; Kühl, 2013). As similarly described by Ingvaldsen and Benders (2020) as well as by Resch and Steyaert (2020), a taboo of even talking about hierarchy implied that efforts making explicit how people at Zenseact (should) relate to one another were avoided, leaving it up to informal, local initiatives to clarify what "less-hierarchical" organizing meant in practice. With the non-hierarchical Zeniverse and traditional pyramidal organization charts co-existing, experience and talk about Zenseact's organization design grew increasingly apart (cf. Hallonsten, 2022; Meyer & Rowan, 1977).

Another commonly voiced concern about new organizational forms is that they do not "scale". As such, many scholars as well as practitioners believe that "less-hierarchical", "self-managing", and/or "agile" organizing—though perhaps suitable for small service firms—does not work for larger organizations with more complex product offerings (see especially Foss & Klein, 2022). Once needs for production standardization and/or inter-team coordination come into play, successful organization without managerial hierarchy seems much harder to achieve (cf. Martela, 2019; see also paper III). And as outlined in sub-section 3.3.3, there indeed are recognizably many "small service firms"—software startups, consulting businesses, and the like—among cases of new organizational forms (see e.g., Fjeldstad et al., 2012; Kolbjørnsrud, 2018; Lindgren & Packendorff, 2006). The NWoW movement is filled with such companies as well, often young and born in the digital age—much like Zenseact (see papers II and III), though Zenseact is not necessarily a "small" organization.

6.1.2. *Enabling of coordination in new forms*

While coordination is a crucial challenge in "new organizational forms", this thesis shows that moving from managerial hierarchy to new organizational forms does not inevitably have to lead to breakdowns in coordination. Forces pulling towards managerial hierarchy are strong—but they can be overcome. The perhaps most illustrative example is that of Buurtzorg, a successful healthcare organization with more than 14,000 employees, only two of which occupy formal managerial positions (Martela & Nandram, 2025). As also argued for the Zenseact case in paper II, there is more to such organizations than their reduced degree of managerial hierarchy. Simply removing hierarchical structures and telling employees that they are "autonomous" now, as essentially happened at Zenseact, is not sufficient—some other guardrails, some other coordination mechanism(s) need(s) to be put in place (see especially Laloux, 2014; Lee & Edmondson, 2017). Drawing from the papers appended to this thesis, *sensemaking devices* are spotlighted as critical coordination mechanisms when organizing beyond managerial hierarchy. Additionally, there are two other aspects highlighted as crucial to the development of effective sensemaking devices and to effective coordination when organizing differently: *Menschenbild* and *situatedness*.

Sensemaking devices

This thesis work primarily points at *sensemaking devices* (see paper II) as facilitating coordination in new organizational forms. The concept of sensemaking devices is grounded in a renewed understanding of managerial hierarchy and its alternatives. As outlined in paper II, rather than interpreting managerial hierarchy simply as the determinant of an organization's structure, it may also be viewed as constituting a sensemaking device—the most common, culturally engrained tool people draw upon to interpret and handle complex social situations (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Oborn et al., 2013).²¹ As such, removing managerial hierarchy—as happened at Zenseact—implies the elimination of the default sensemaking device. This explains why people at Zenseact struggled to organize effectively once experiencing complex situations and issues of inter-team coordination.

Paper II shows that when managerial hierarchy is removed, the clarity and guidance commonly provided by managerial hierarchy can be substituted by alternative sensemaking devices. Importantly, paper II shows that the repertoire of alternative sensemaking devices is *not* limited to structures but may also encompass practices, narratives, metaphors, and/or artifacts (cf. Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). In essence, the concept of sensemaking devices increases our sensitivity for a broader range of alternatives to managerial hierarchy.

At Zenseact, alternative sensemaking devices like the Zeniverse or the “People at heart” motto were put forward early into their organizing journey. However, not all proposed sensemaking devices were fully developed, and some of them failed to be effective in informing how people worked and organized together as they did not connect to people's work experience and/or did not provide concrete guidance for their actions. For instance, the early intention of articulating a unique culture and organizational practices—the “Zenuity way of working”—never materialized. As such, the “exceptional relational work” (Resch & Steyaert, 2020, p. 717) that organizing void of managerial hierarchy requires (see also Breidenbach & Rollow, 2019) was largely left untouched at Zenseact. Meanwhile, Zenseact's purpose of “Towards zero faster” and its motto of “People at heart” have been explicit guiding points since the company's inception—though mostly remaining abstract principles rather than concrete guideposts for everyday organizational practices. Abstract principles which do not correspond to concrete organizational practices are of little value; principles and practices should be mutually constitutive (cf. Kanter, 1972; Kornberger, 2022). In the absence of a clear connection between principles and practices, Zenseact turned to SAFe and Organization 2.0—a re-organization initiative which looked and felt like managerial hierarchy (without explicitly acknowledging it), hence clarifying structures and relationships and thereby providing a powerful sensemaking device.

Counter to what Zenseact's journey may suggest, a reduction in hierarchical structures and rules does not necessarily imply an absence of (structural) guidance on presumably “soft” or “cultural” aspects of organization design (Breidenbach & Rollow, 2019; de Morree, 2025). A reduction in formal hierarchical structures indeed seems to increase the need for alternative sources of guidance (cf. Breidenbach & Rollow, 2019; Fjeldstad et al., 2012). In the language

²¹ The acknowledgment of managerial hierarchy as a culturally engrained sensemaking device reveals parallels to Florian's (2018) characterization of bureaucracy as a “cultural trope”.

of paper II, effective alternative sources of guidance may be perceived as sensemaking devices *connecting to experience* and *providing guidance for action*. In a broader sense, sensemaking devices can be thought of as coordination mechanisms (cf. Weick, 1995) facilitating the integration of organizational effort through clarifying *accountability*, increasing *predictability*, and/or providing *common understanding* (see Okhuysen & Bechky, 2009). For instance, Zenseact’s “People at heart” motto clearly fosters a *common understanding* of the organization’s purpose but provides limited accountability and predictability, leaving it up to individual initiative to ask, “Is this really People at heart?”, and thereby put decisions to the test. In contrast, the Organization 2.0 re-organization initiative, with its implicit hierarchical structures and roles, did not only look and feel familiar (*common understanding*); it also clarified *accountability* in a more diverse and more rigorously defined set of roles as well as increased *predictability* by introducing a fixed working rhythm for the entire company in the form of PI plannings with a three-month cadence.

Beyond the Zenseact case, an interpretation of sensemaking devices as coordination mechanisms can also illuminate successful examples from the NWoW movement (cf. paper IV). From the perspective of Okhuysen and Bechky’s (2009) integrating conditions for coordination, it does not seem surprising why so many new organizational forms are persistent on developing a common understanding of their shared purpose (cf. Laloux, 2014), why they work with clear roles to define accountability (cf. Robertson, 2015), or why they are so keen on establishing a fitting “operating rhythm” to increase predictability (cf. de Morree, 2023).²²

More specifically, decision-making practices like the advice process (see especially Laloux, 2014) tone down the need for a clear managerial hierarchy by increasing not only freedom but also *accountability* for individual organizational actors; they make *predictable* that others will involve you when they require your expertise or opinion on a decision, based on a *common understanding* that necessary voices will be heard before a decision is made. At W.L. Gore, the waterline metaphor makes this common understanding even more tangible, tying the interpretation of when it is necessary to involve others to the question of organization-wide impact rather than fixed budgetary limits (cf. Dignan, 2019). Finally, Morning Star’s CLOUs—short for “colleague letters of understanding”—develop a *common understanding* for *accountabilities* in bilateral colleague relationships and make them *predictable* by fixing them in morally binding, written agreements up for constant revision. From this perspective, the advice process, the waterline metaphor, and CLOUs are powerful sensemaking devices; powerful coordination mechanisms as situated in their local contexts.

Upon exposing the concept of “sensemaking devices” to a broader realm of insights from both the scholarly literature (cf. study B) and the practitioner discourse (cf. study C), we may not only expand its empirical reach but also refine the concept itself—concretely, regarding different *types* and *degrees of formalization* of sensemaking devices. Regarding the former, paper II acknowledged metaphors, narratives, structures, practices, and artifacts as five types of sensemaking devices, hinting at the possibility of further types. While boundaries between types are admittedly fluid and conceptual (cf. paper II), further types seem identifiable within

²² Drawing on language from paper III, an organization’s operating rhythm should be synchronized with its “tempo of trust”; otherwise, trustful collaboration cannot be maintained.

the new forms literature. For instance, several scholars highlight the importance of designing and providing effective “*spaces*” for interaction and negotiation (Battilana et al., 2015; Lee et al., 2020; see also “arenas” in Ostrom, 2011), such as meetings and discussion forums, for effective coordination within new organizational forms. Within (and beyond) such spaces, scholars observe the relevance of effective “*scripts*” for interactions and relationships (Lee et al., 2020; Polletta, 2022; see also “rules” in Ostrom, 2011), expressed for instance through cultural norms, meeting templates, formalized roles, or decision-making rules. We can, again, view such spaces and scripts as sensemaking devices, facilitating coordination through providing common understanding, accountability, and/or predictability. At Zenseact for instance, spaces and scripts largely remained implicit in their guidance for relationships. Discussions were often held on Slack or in diverse meetings, but decisions were often ultimately made in smaller circles (spaces). Scripts beyond the powerful “People at heart” motto—such as could have been articulated within a “Zenuity way of working”—stayed largely implicit (cf. paper II).

Similarly, information technology and digital software tools seem to play an important nurturing role for effective coordination within new organizational forms (see also e.g., Martela, 2023; Zammuto et al., 2007). At Zenseact for instance (cf. paper III), Slack enables quick and transparent communication, making opinions, emotions, and discussions public which would otherwise remain hidden from most employees; it thus shapes Zenseact’s organizational culture and arguably facilitates its “tempo of trust”, meaning that Zenseact can grow more quickly without degrading trust between its employees. Many other “less-hierarchical”, “self-managing”, and “agile” organizations leverage similar technologies and tools—often custom-built for the purposes of (specific) new organizational forms, such as Buurtzorg’s Buurtzorgweb (Martela & Nandram, 2025), SpesaSospesa’s Refood blockchain platform (D’Antone et al., 2024), or Enspirai’s Loomio (Resch, 2019).²³ One might also think of Zenseact’s Zeniverse in this light and accordingly interpret such technologies and tools as *artifactual* sensemaking devices (cf. paper II).

Next to constituting a possibly broader range of *types*, different sensemaking devices may also be characterized with varying *degrees of formalization*. Both academics and practitioners frequently underscore the need to “codify” or “formalize” purposes, principles, and practices in new organizational forms (see e.g., Corporate Rebels, 2024; Lee & Edmondson, 2017). In the absence of formal managers calling the shots, many new organizational forms for instance employ unusually elaborate mechanisms and/or explicit guidelines for making decisions and resolving conflicts (cf. e.g., Pietinalho & Martela, 2024; Polletta, 2022; Snow & Fjeldstad, 2023). Many new form pioneers—such as Valve—use written handbooks or similar tools for such formalization (Cabantous et al., 2016; Felin & Powell, 2016; Laloux, 2014; Lee & Edmondson, 2017). In some organizations, these documents achieve almost legal status (cf. Lee & Edmondson, 2017; see also Ostrom, 2011), as exemplified by Holacracy’s “Constitution” (Robertson, 2015) or RHD’s “Bill of Rights and Responsibilities” (Laloux, 2014). In the language of paper II, such written documents can again be interpreted as artifactual sensemaking devices. As outlined in paper II, Zenseact held a clear intention of developing an

²³ For more information on Loomio specifically, see: <https://www.loomio.com/>.

“open company handbook” defining clear “rules for collaboration”—which, however, is yet to be realized.

In contrast, other new form pioneers (such as Buurtzorg) prioritize continuous collective discussion and engagement with the organization’s evolving purpose, principles, and practices over formalization (cf. Laloux, 2014). They collectively develop and hone “shared principles” (Pietinalho & Martela, 2024) and engage in “relational work” (Resch & Steyaert, 2020) to continuously (re)define how they work together. Zenseact’s “People at heart” motto is a case in point here, being explicitly present in everyday discussions at the company despite not being “formalized” in a traditional sense. In that respect, some types of sensemaking devices—like structures, artifacts, scripts, and spaces—seem inherently more formalizable and stabilizable, though they do not have to be; their interpretation and use can, of course, not be fully predetermined and controlled. Other types—like practices, metaphors, and narratives—seem to provide an inherently greater leeway for interpretation, though constant engagement with and development of such sensemaking devices can lead to a firm, (temporarily) stabilized, and hence “quasi-formalized” understanding (as exemplified by Zenseact’s “People at heart” motto).

Altogether, the “sensemaking devices” concept enhances our understanding of managerial hierarchy and its possible alternatives. As already described in sub-section 3.3.2, a reduction in hierarchical structures and rules does not mean that new organizational forms are inevitably chaotic arenas void of any formalization. Though some contemporary organization designs seem “vague and unspecific” (Huettermann et al., 2024, p. 336), they do not have to be. To the contrary, explicit engagement with and design of the organization—of how people relate to one another and how they coordinate their work—seems like a crucial success factor for new organizational forms (cf. e.g., Felin & Powell, 2016; Fjeldstad et al., 2012; Lee & Edmondson, 2017). “Institutional details” indeed matter (Ostrom, 2011). Organization design(ing) clarifies; it is about “making less equivocal” how people do things together (Weick, 1977, p. 36). As such, “new organizational forms” are *not* about organizing *less*, but about organizing *differently* (cf. also du Gay & Vikkelsø, 2017). As implied above and also illustrated by the organizational form tool advanced in paper I, organization design(ing) does not have to be confined to the domain of formal organizational structure (Felin & Powell, 2016; Fjeldstad et al., 2012; Grandori, 1997b; Yoo et al., 2006); it can draw from a diverse repertoire of coordination mechanisms—including, as spotlighted in this thesis, various sensemaking devices.

Menschenbild

Beyond sensemaking devices as critical coordination mechanisms, (new) organizational forms seem to benefit from a shared *Menschenbild*. As outlined in paper IV, the German term “Menschenbild”²⁴—frequently used in philosophical, anthropological, and ethical discussions (Düwell, 2011; Zichy, 2017, 2019) but largely absent from organization studies (for notable exceptions see Hesch, 1997, and Rylander Eklund & Simpson, 2020)—metaphorically refers to one’s assumptions about human beings (Zichy, 2017). Literally meaning “image of the human being”, the Menschenbild concept may contain both descriptive and normative

²⁴ Unlike the English language, other Germanic languages have words to describe similar meaning, like Swedish (*människosyn*) as well as Danish and Norwegian (*menneskesyn*).

connotations, capable of expressing not only how humans are but also how they should be (Düwell, 2011; Zichy, 2019).

In a broad sense, the success of (contemporary) organization(s) seems to depend on fit between organizational form and underlying values and assumptions—including the Menschenbild (de Morree, 2021; Eylon, 1998; Kraus, 1980; Miles et al., 2009; Miles & Creed, 1995; Scott Morton, 1995; Soetens & Huybrechts, 2023; see already McGregor, 1960). Within the NWoW movement specifically, the Menschenbild (at least the aspired and propagated one) is decidedly positive, marking a stark contrast to the dominant image of homo economicus—of humans as boundedly rational self-interest maximizers (Ghoshal, 2005; Puranam et al., 2014). As outlined in paper IV, multiple voices within the NWoW movement articulate the importance of being “people-positive” (Dignan, 2019). In the words of Pim de Morree (2021, emphases added) from the Corporate Rebels:

We have visited 150+ companies around the world that have successfully transitioned to self-managing ways of working. And they have done so because of one important reason: their *genuine belief in people*. They believe that *humans are good*. They believe that *people are trustworthy and responsible*. They believe that *people crave meaning, purpose, and autonomy*. Yes, even at work... If you genuinely believe this, it doesn't make any sense at all to organize work in a command-and-control kind of way.

To members of the NWoW movement, “our way of working is a reflection of our assumptions and beliefs about human nature” (Dignan, 2019, p. 38). If you are not clear about your assumptions—if you do not adopt a people-positive Menschenbild—opting for new organizational forms and collaborative ways of working, as per NWoW proponents, is a waste of time (Alexander, 2022; de Morree, 2021; Kraus, 1980; Senge, 2006). Correspondingly, developing and constantly reflecting on a clear set of values seems crucial for new forms (Melé, 2005; Snow & Fjeldstad, 2023). In that regard, the values articulated in the proposed Manifesto for Agile Organization Development (cf. paper III)—trust over control, relationships over structures, inclusion over short-term efficiency, and proactivity over conformity—though developed in the context of “agile”, resonate strongly with the broader NWoW movement and the idea of organizing based on a people-positive Menschenbild. As such, “[s]elf-organization is primarily a model of culture, not structure” (Breidenbach & Rollow, 2019, p. 14).

Clarification of one's (organization's) Menschenbild can further facilitate sensemaking and coordination as it provides explicit guidance on how to treat other human beings—with respect, involvement, and trust rather than suspicion, exclusion, and control—without prescribing specific actions to individuals. It is such a spirit that the manifesto proposed in paper III aims to capture; departing from joint principles and values which reflect a people-positive Menschenbild yet encouraging local development of practices and local decision-making. As such, clear traces of a people-positive Menschenbild are not only apparent in the broader NWoW movement (see paper IV) but also in study A: At Zenseact, a people-positive Menschenbild is inherent in the original organization design as well as the aspirations of the organization's first CEO (see paper II), and continues to be prominent in everyday

organizational life through the sensemaking device of “People at heart” and related practices such as cultural fikas²⁵ (see paper III).

Situatedness

While a broad range of sensemaking devices and a shared Menschenbild can facilitate coordination when organizing differently from managerial hierarchy, their practical effectiveness crucially depends on their *situatedness* within the local context (cf. Giddens, 1984; Orlikowski, 2002; Rylander Eklund et al., 2021; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011). Organization is an inherently social and continuously unfolding practice; any assumptions and sensemaking devices (same as purposes, principles, and practices) hence hold meaning only insofar they are intelligible in a specific situated context at a specific moment in time (cf. Okhuysen & Bechky, 2009; Ostrom, 2011; Ringel & Brichzin, 2021; Weick et al., 2005). As such, organizing differently requires continuous engagement with—and discussion of—an organization’s Menschenbild; it requires development of sensemaking devices that, literally, “make sense” in the situation at hand (cf. also Follett, 1941, and her “law of the situation”). Consequently, organization should first be perceived as language-dependent because organization design possibilities are confined by the vocabularies and narratives locally created, used, and understood (cf. Cabantous et al., 2016; Ringel & Brichzin, 2021; for a practitioner-based take, see Kirkpatrick, 2024). Second, organization should be perceived as change- and contestable. Assumptions, purposes, principles, practices, and sensemaking devices—such as those codified in Valve’s handbook or Morning Star’s CLOUs, for instance—should only be fixed for the moment to provide temporary stabilization, yet remain open to be revised as people, their perspectives, and situations change (Palmås & von Busch, 2015; Shanahan, 2023).

Given the situatedness of assumptions, purposes, principles, practices, and sensemaking devices, it seems hard for formal organizational leaders (if they still exist) to develop and continuously discuss all of them in a purposeful, “coordinated” way. This is especially the case for organizations of a certain complexity, size, and/or geographical dispersion. Consultants offer tempting shortcuts in the form of ready-made blueprints and models, promising quick results by importing other organizations’ successes—by “scaling” their less-hierarchical, self-managing, and/or agile organizational designs and practices—to the focal organization. However, as illustrated also by the Zenseact case and their implementation of SAFe (see papers II and III), organizational frameworks by and large do not work (cf. Kärreman et al., 2021; Ormrod et al., 2007). In designing and developing a “new organizational form”, one can surely draw inspiration from the assumptions, purposes, principles, practices, and sensemaking devices of new form pioneers. Simply picking or copying things that seem attractive from the bazaar of new ways of working, though, will not be enough. Different organizational problems require different practical solutions (cf. du Gay & Vikkelsø, 2017; Ostrom, 2011). Most people would agree that copying a competitor’s product (or a neighbor’s house) makes for bad product (or architectural) design; copying another organization’s organizational design should hence be unattractive as well.²⁶

²⁵ A “fika” is an institutionalized coffee break, popular in Swedish (work) culture for building community and exchange over a coffee and a pastry.

²⁶ This sentence is inspired by a similar remark Frithjof Wegener made during a webinar of the Organization Design Community (ODC) on May 22, 2025.

Engrained in most “new organizational forms” sold through frameworks are promises of “speed” and “scale” (Kärreman et al., 2021; Rigby et al., 2018), representing related desires of the present economic and societal system (see e.g., Rosa, 2005). At Zenseact for instance, these promises found expression through their “Towards zero faster” slogan and their implementation of the Scaled Agile Framework (see papers II and III). As implied in paper III though, the “more is always better”-logic inherent in common aspirations for “speed” and “scale” should be met with caution; the appropriate “speed” and “scale”, again, should be determined contextually. Concretely, the idea of “scaling” organizational designs and/or practices along existing structural dimensions to move from 50 to 500 to 5,000 people—an idea particularly prominent in the discourse about agile organizations—overshadows possibilities of “growing” (an) organization sustainably based on shared human experiences, values, and principles. As articulated in the fifth principle of the Manifesto for Agile Organization Development suggested in paper III, organizations can only grow sustainably at their own tempo of trust. The core question for the organization is: How quickly can we train and enculture new workers so that they and their colleagues trust them to carry out their work successfully, without losing sight of our purpose?

As such, the work at hand, its coordination and skill requirements, and the local culture play a considerable role in determining the tempo of trust. Consider Buurtzorg for instance (cf. Martela & Nandram, 2025). Nursing is a practice- and skill-based profession with a strong ethical and motivational ground for helping their clients heal and become independent. Buurtzorg’s nursing teams work relatively independent from each other, yet can draw on a strong common understanding and shared professional ethos—all of them having been trained and having worked as nurses. Many nurses at Buurtzorg “self-selected” into working at the company as they heard good things about its organizational culture and approach. All these factors increase the tempo of trust at Buurtzorg, making rapid organizational growth sustainable.

Contrast that to Zenseact. Most of Zenseact’s employees are trained as software engineers. While the nursing profession builds on a strong shared professional ethos, the professional ethos of the software engineering profession is arguably less articulated (or at least more open and varied). Furthermore, the automotive industry and mother company Volvo Cars’ identity as a leader in automotive safety have strong cultural imprinting effects on Zenseact, with many employees being trained and encultured in these environments. The software platform for autonomous driving that Zenseact is developing—more so than for other software firms like Spotify (cf. paper III)—implies strong inter-team interdependencies and high degrees of technical complexity, inherent for instance in the diversity of sensor data to be processed and fused, challenges of integrating software and hardware, and the need to develop and deploy intricate machine learning models. Despite its strong “People at heart” culture, the tempo of trust at which Zenseact can sustainably grow is arguably lower than for Buurtzorg (or Spotify). In the words of Mary Parker Follett (1941, p. 110), “you should never give authority faster than you can develop methods for the worker taking responsibility for that authority”. As illustrated in paper II, Zenseact’s employees were given authority with little guidance and before “methods”, or “ways of working”, were being developed. Effective inter-team collaboration—which is crucial for the success of organizations aspiring to be “less-hierarchical”, “self-

managing”, and/or “agile” (cf. Ingvaldsen & Rolfsen, 2012)—remained a common struggle at Zenseact. When organizing differently, it is critical to know when to grow and speed up, and when to slow down “to organize things well” (D’Antone et al., 2024, p. 17; see also Hollstein & Rosa, 2023; Kärreman et al., 2021).

Organizing differently requires a deep appreciation of the situated context in all its intricacies, and consequently entails skepticism towards off-the-shelf frameworks and their promises of “speed” and “scale”. Latest at the level of concrete organizational practice(s), local translation and practical engagement, however time-consuming, will be required (cf. Kärreman et al., 2021; Ormrod et al., 2007). Relatedly, paper III—with its proposed manifesto—makes agile organization design principles and its underlying values explicit as informed by the Zenseact case, yet highlights the inherent context-specificity of organizational practices. In that sense, the task of leaders should be to design, make explicit, and nurture the *conditions* for people to thrive and collaborate in the absence of managerial hierarchy (cf. principle 2 in paper III), while leaving the development of specific practice(s) to those closer to the actual work (cf. Kärreman et al., 2021; Kornberger, 2022; for a practitioner perspective, cf. Breidenbach & Rollow, 2019). As shown in paper IV, the key organization design challenge is, in the words of voices from the NWoW movement, to “create an environment” (Laloux, 2014, p. 151), a “supportive culture” (Minnaar & de Morree, 2019, p. 80) offering “safe and open spaces” (Dignan, 2019, p. 157) for people to collectively strive for the organization’s purpose while utilizing the full repertoire of their abilities and experiences.

Summary

In extant organizational theory and practice, coordination of collective effort is largely understood in terms of managerial hierarchy and its associated formalized structures, rules, and roles (Bernacchio & Foss, 2024; Fjeldstad et al., 2012; Kühl, 2020; Okhuysen & Bechky, 2009). In the absence of managerial hierarchy, coordination in “new organizational forms” becomes particularly challenging. This does not mean, though, that coordination breakdowns in “new organizational forms” are inevitable. Following this thesis, coordination in “new organizational forms” can be facilitated by *sensemaking devices*, a shared *Menschenbild*, and *situatedness*. These three items embed into a broader range of long-acknowledged alternative, other-than-hierarchical coordination mechanisms (see e.g., Galbraith, 1974; Gittell, 2000; Hsieh & Vergne, 2023; Jensen & Mikkelsen, 2024; Mintzberg, 1980; Okhuysen & Bechky, 2009; Thompson, 1967), such as a distinct organizational culture and values (Foss, 2003; Selznick, 1994), a shared professional ethos and knowledge base (Bechky, 2006; Mintzberg, 2023), or peer control (Barker, 1993; Lee & Edmondson, 2017). This thesis offers further unpacking regarding what these alternative coordination mechanisms may be, avoiding to simply subsume them under vague labels like “informal” coordination or “mutual adjustment” (cf. Fjeldstad et al., 2012; Mintzberg, 1980, 2023; Okhuysen & Bechky, 2009; Thompson, 1967; Wagner, 2021).

6.2. Conceptualizing new organizational forms (RQ2)

6.2.1. *At face value: A configuration of features*

One way to address the question of how new organizational forms are conceptualized (cf. RQ2) is to turn to the main features identified and the integrative framework proposed in paper I.

Following paper I, at face value, a new organizational form can be regarded as a discrete configuration of organizational features which distinguishes it from established forms such as managerial hierarchy and bureaucracy. Newness, while inherently a matter of context and degree (Palmer et al., 2007; see also Johannessen et al., 2001), can be found across six element dimensions: strategy, structure, process, purpose, power, and people. More specifically, paper I pinpoints five main features associated with new organizational forms: community-based organizing, decentralized decision-making authority, self-organizing teams, networking, and flexible work.

Paper I essentially advocates a configurational approach to the study of (new) organizational forms, offering a “periodic table” (Grandori & Furnari, 2008) or “toolkit” (Tracey et al., 2011) which outlines the components from which (new) organizational forms can be designed and understood. A common misconception about new organizational forms is that they necessarily imply a total absence of structure (Bernstein et al., 2016; Felin & Powell, 2016; Kokkinidis, 2015; Parker et al., 2014a). Following a configurational approach, any functioning organizational form will have to contain/address elements from all six dimensions (including structure), though it may increase or decrease their respective prevalence (cf. also Grandori & Furnari, 2008). Aiming for the complete absence of structure does not seem advisable. New organizational forms will therefore need to be more than just “less-hierarchical”.

6.2.2. *Beyond face value: An underspecified, overused, and performative concept*

Looking beyond face value, paper I showed that the new organizational forms discourse is subject to a label game, with ever-new labels coming into fashion to characterize what is new about new forms (see also Foss & Klein, 2022; Köhl, 2020). The case of Zenseact (see paper II) is representative for the use of labels such as “less-hierarchical”, “self-managing”, and “agile” in practice. With these labels often being used in combination or even interchangeably, it remains impalpable what the individual labels actually mean (see also Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011a; Spicer, 2013). Just like Zappos (cf. paper I), the popular case of Valve has been characterized by researchers with a broad variety of labels, such as “non-hierarchical” (Puranam & Håkansson, 2015), “ostensibly hierarchy free” (Foss & Klein, 2023, p. 54), “flat” (Workiewicz, 2023), “self-managing” (Lee & Edmondson, 2017), “self-organizing” (Billinger & Workiewicz, 2019), “polyarchic” (Felin & Powell, 2016), “boss-less” (Ketkar & Workiewicz, 2022), or “decentralized” (Lee, 2024). As also mentioned in paper I, it remains *underspecified* what (if anything) is special about these particular labels, which fuzzies our understanding of “new organizational forms”.

As alluded to in paper I, the story of new organizational form emergence seems to repeat itself in fashion or hype cycles (cf. Madsen, 2020; Piazza & Abrahamson, 2020): Practitioners identify the next hot idea, for instance Agile, Holacracy, or DAO. The media celebrate early pioneers, industry associations form, consultants try to package the pioneers’ success into a sellable model, and business schools start offering first courses. Researchers join in to evaluate the newness and identify success factors and challenges of the new form. More and more organizations, across sectors, try to adopt it. The cycle heats up until enough failed cases have been reported and/or the next hype cycle takes off. From a conceptual standpoint, this label game does not seem helpful—also because many of these labels, or at least their underlying

ideas, have been around for at least half a century (Herbst, 1976a, 1976b; Kraus, 1980; Slater & Bennis, 1964).

The repeating hype cycle of “new organizational forms” can lead to an *overuse* (or overconsumption) of new ideas and models, overwhelming organizations and their employees with constant change initiatives (cf. Hallonsten, 2022; Kärreman et al., 2021). In the case of Zenseact (cf. papers II and III), the organization’s design was first inspired by the Agile Manifesto and aimed for a unique “Zenuity way of working” in self-managing teams. Other models like Holacracy were discussed early on but not (fully) implemented. Over time, Zenseact increasingly drew on the Spotify model and aspired to “end-to-end responsibility”. With the Organization 2.0 re-organization initiative, the company largely adopted SAFe. In subsequent change initiatives, the organization increasingly distanced itself from SAFe, drawing more explicit inspiration from the BAPO model. Some employees at Zenseact felt that the organization was being “overdesigned”, changing the organization again and again before previous changes came into effect (cf. to what Puranam [2024] calls “repetitive reorg syndrome”).

Beyond their underspecification and overuse, what makes the “new organizational forms” concept and related labels even more problematic is their *performativity*. Conceptualizations of new organizational forms are not just descriptive of some phenomenon “out there”; when organizations get inspired by and/or adopt related models, new forms can become performative, turning ideas into experienced social reality (cf. Ghoshal, 2005; Gond et al., 2016; see also Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996). Aspirations of “less-hierarchical”, “self-managing”, and/or “agile” organizing make people feel, speak, and act differently regarding how they (should) work and collaborate with each other. With the introduction of Organization 2.0 for instance, employees at Zenseact experienced an increased need to “align” with others; communicate information, discuss decisions, and so on (cf. paper II). Similarly, many employees continued believing in and being proud of the Zeniverse, of the image of a hierarchy-free organization, although their organizational experience shifted away from that image through the introduction of traditional organization charts, a broader variety of job titles (at essentially more hierarchical levels), and related experiences of slow and siloed decision-making. Under the cover of SAFe, managerial hierarchy increasingly spread within Zenseact—without being explicitly acknowledged (see sub-section 6.1.1).

6.2.3. *New-washing: Problematizing the “new form” concept*

Given the performative potential of ideas and models brought up in the “new organizational forms” discourse, the overarching conceptual notion of “new organizational form” can (and arguably should) be problematized. First, the rhetoric of organizational form newness—though not without any merit—seems heavily inflated. As alluded to in sub-section 3.3.4 as well as in paper I, the new organizational forms discourse is prone to “new-washing” (cf. EL Khoury et al., 2024); to practitioners, consultants, and researchers—some consciously, some unconsciously—ascribing more newness to organizational forms than there actually is.

New-washing can partially be explained by shortsightedness—by practitioners, consultants, and researchers applying a narrow reference point, assuming the prototypical industrial business corporation of the 20th century as the only object of comparison. Expanding our view,

it becomes evident that much of what we consider radically “new” about new organizational forms—such as organizing in self-managing teams without managerial hierarchy, making use of democratic decision-making practices, or building on the assumption that humans are inherently social, capable, and trustworthy beings—has been prominent (though partially forgotten) in our social world for a long time (cf. Graeber & Wengrow, 2021). Principles of trust, collaboration, and community are prevalent in many organizational settings we experience in our everyday lives, such as in local sports clubs, online communities, or self-help groups. We know such “alternative” purposes, principles, and practices well from social movements, voluntary organizations, non-profit organizations, political initiatives, and many more (see e.g., Battilana & Beckman, 2025; Parker et al., 2007). As such, some of the newness ascribed to “new organizational forms” seems contextually bound or historically blind; common stories of the increasing sophistication of organizational forms across time appear shortsighted (cf. Graeber & Wengrow, 2021; Peltonen et al., 2017).

Second, the extant use of “organization” in “new organizational forms” can be problematized (cf. sub-section 3.1.2). Beyond linguistic twists towards “new forms of *organizing*”, more awareness seems required for an understanding of organization as a social technology—a tool for achieving things together, designable by people, for people (cf. Diefenbach, 2019; Meyer & Höllerer, 2014; Puranam, 2024; Selznick, 1994; Walsh et al., 2006). This invites a view that is more concerned with actual organizing practice(s) and how they affect the organizational experience of people and their interactions. It emphasizes the importance of actual work experience, of the things people do (i.e., their “ways of working”) for the “organizational form” (cf. also Kornberger, 2022).

Finally, the notion of “form” requires problematization for it being overly inclusive while inviting an overemphasis on *formal* organizational structure and outer appearance (cf. sub-section 3.1.1; see Grandori & Furnari, 2008; Köhl, 2013; Meyer & Höllerer, 2014). It is important to remember that every organization is unique; every organization, in some way, has its own form (cf. Mintzberg, 2024). The “form” concept hence allows for an artificial and simplifying categorization of organizing efforts which, as any categorization, should be taken with a pinch of salt (cf. van Maanen, 2011, p. 8). Categorization seems useful for scientific purposes of understanding, evaluating, and comparing—but it should never be taken as naturally given. Considering the real-life complexity of organization(s), ideal-typical organizational forms—such as hierarchy, market, equality, and community (cf. sub-section 3.2.1)—might fruitfully serve as conceptual language to investigate organization(s) with a more contextual or situational focus (cf. paper IV and Follett’s [1941] law of the situation). As already claimed by Flanagan (1989, pp. 261–262), “[t]here are no egalitarian societies. [...] However, there are egalitarian contexts, or scenes, or situations. [...] Even rigidly hierarchical systems may contain egalitarian subsystems, just as so-called egalitarian systems may contain insidious hierarchies”.

Viewed this way, some organizational elements (cf. paper I)—some coordination mechanisms or sensemaking devices (cf. paper II)—might be more hierarchical in orientation, others more community-based, and so on (cf. Grandori & Furnari, 2008; see also Martela, 2019). For instance, an organization’s decision-making practices may be based on managers calling the shots (hierarchy), idea competitions (market), consensus (equality), or consent (community).

Even when decisions are being voted on, different voting procedures can indicate different orientations, for instance depending on how eligible decision options are being selected, who is being allowed to vote, or what majority threshold is being required. Looking at concrete organizational elements and practices, the analysis of organization design possibilities hence becomes more granular. At an overarching conceptual level, organizing efforts can still be located and categorized within an organizational form typology, and organizational elements can be identified as more or less “new” (cf. paper I). Overall, some skepticism about how “new” certain forms actually are seems appropriate, calling us to examine in more nuanced ways what exactly is different about a specific “organizational form”. Likewise, the actual “form” the organization takes seems of secondary importance as long as it reflects, and enables the unfolding of, the underlying assumptions, purposes, and principles (cf. D’Antone et al., 2024).

6.2.4. *Mythification: Problematizing “new form” labels*

The conventional, enthusiastic narrative of “new organizational forms” largely paints the picture of a heavenly place—of autonomous individuals freed from the shackles of bureaucracy and managerial hierarchy, intrinsically motivated to work together on achieving a higher purpose without the need for formal leaders. A more skeptical interpretation points at possible loopholes in this narrative.

Beyond “new-washing” tendencies and related contextual boundedness and historical blindness in the discourse, some newness ascribed to “new organizational forms” appears to be mainly rhetorical, building on exaggerated claims about certain new form properties (see also Jensen & Mikkelsen, 2024). For instance, like many other cases (see e.g., Foss & Klein, 2022), Zenseact does not seem as “less-hierarchical” as it initially intended (and sometimes continues to claim). Many stories of “less-hierarchical”, “self-managing”, and “agile” organizing entail myths of shared or “leaderless” leadership (see e.g., Keshtiban et al., 2021; Salovaara et al., 2024)—despite the continued imprinting role of powerful yet generous CEO-leaders in many pioneering new form organizations (Foss & Klein, 2022; Martela, 2023; Ormrod et al., 2007).

As such, an organization’s hierarchy might be “flattened” without such flattening necessarily implying any decentralization of authority out of the CEO’s hands (Kühl, 2020; Puranam, 2024). One can suspect that image building and employer branding play a relevant role in many organizations’ decision for adopting a “new organizational form” (cf. Kühl, 2020; Lee & Edmondson, 2017; Martela, 2019). As outlined in sub-section 3.3.4, the discourse and practice of “new organizational forms” seems prone to mythification (Cederström & Spicer, 2015; du Gay, 2000; Gabriel, 1995; Kühl, 2020)—to powerful leaders appropriating desires for individual autonomy, meaning, and fulfillment and thereby turning organizational issues into individual ones. Counter to the common narrative (cf. section 2.3), “new” forms may not always be the “heroes”, and “traditional” forms are not necessarily the “villains” (cf. du Gay, 2000; Florian, 2018).

Consequently, not only does the “new organizational forms” concept itself warrant problematization—so do too some of its related labels and concepts. Across the papers appended to this thesis, several new form labels and concepts have been scrutinized and reconceptualized. Concretely, paper II suggests that “less-hierarchical” organizing should entail more than just an abandonment of hierarchical structures; these hierarchical structures need to

be substituted by alternative sensemaking devices, which could take the form of structures but also practices, metaphors, narratives, and artifacts. Paper III tackles the extant notion of organization-level “agile”, revealing its discrepancy from the assumptions and values inherent in the original idea of agile as inherent in the Agile Manifesto and suggesting an alternative trajectory for “growing” rather than “scaling” agile in the spirit of the original manifesto. Finally, paper IV offers an alternative lens for understanding contemporary organizations like Morning Star, W.L. Gore, and Buurtzorg, characterizing them by their philosophy grounded in a people-positive Menschenbild rather than by their “self-managing”, decentralized authority structure. Connecting the Menschenbild of organizations from the NWoW movement to the thinking of Mary Parker Follett (1918, 1941), paper IV illustrates that while some of their practices may be “new”, their underlying assumptions and ideas seem quite “old” or “classical”.

Regarding the notion of “self-managing” organizations, paper IV further draws on the relational process ontology of Mary Parker Follett to problematize the dominant understanding of SMOs in terms of “decentralized” authority. To Follett (1941), as to others (Mintzberg, 2023), the emphasis on centralization and decentralization as opposing forces—with centralization as the presumed default—is misleading. By definition, a self-managing organization implies radical and holistic decentralization of authority—a complete elimination of the manager-subordinate supervision relationship (Lee & Edmondson, 2017). In research, this criterion is often interpreted leniently (see e.g., Lee, 2024, and the prevalence of “senior leaders” in his study) or essentially led ad absurdum (see e.g., Huettermann et al., 2024, p. 336, to whom “the employee-supervisor relationship is especially important if decentralization is to stimulate emergent leadership”, despite explicitly building their theorizing on Lee and Edmondson’s [2017] work). Some authors seem to be uncomfortable with the decentralization concept as currently used—and yet, though advocating more processual-relational interpretations (see e.g., Hsieh & Vergne, 2022; Lee, 2024), they stick with the concept. The notion of de-centralization inherently carries the assumption that decision-making authority is something that can be purposefully distributed throughout the organization, and that centralization in a managerial hierarchy is the default (cf. Lee & Edmondson, 2017; Reineke et al., 2025).²⁷ As such, managerial hierarchy centralizes, and a reduction in managerial hierarchy decentralizes authority. Contrast that, then, to our experiences of organizational life. We know that what the organization chart predicts and what people actually do are rarely congruent; authority distribution does not seem fully plannable, and context always matters (cf. Kärreman & Alvesson, 2004). Perhaps decentralization is *not* the (only) key characteristic of these “new organizational forms”?

The continued emphasis on decentralization seems doubly surprising in light of its excessive use in the description of a plethora of (new) organizational forms. While authority decentralization may stand in contrast to bureaucratic and hierarchical business corporations, it is hardly a unique characteristic when looking beyond traditional organizational forms. “Holacratic” organizations like Zappos (Farkhondeh & Müller, 2021); “Teal” organizations like Buurtzorg (Laloux, 2014); “self-managing” (Lee & Edmondson, 2017), “boss-less” (Ketkar & Workiewicz, 2022), or “polyarchic” (Felin & Powell, 2016) organizations like Valve;

²⁷ As Michael Lee expressed during a session at the Academy of Management Annual Meeting in 2025, “decentralization is unnatural”; to him, it is *not* “aligned with human nature”.

“decentralized autonomous” organizations like Bitcoin (Hsieh et al., 2018); “platform” organizations like Amazon and Uber (de Vaujany et al., 2021); open-source software communities like Apache (Tonellato et al., 2024); “alternative” organizations like Open Food Network (Shanahan, 2023); social movements like Occupy Wall Street (Keshtiban et al., 2021); even terrorist organizations like Al-Qaeda (Bousquet, 2012; Comas et al., 2015)—all of these organizations and associated forms have been characterized by their “decentralized” authority and associated patterns of self-organization. Simply putting Buurtzorg into the same bucket with the likes of Al-Qaeda, Occupy, and Amazon seems dissatisfying. Even if decentralization was central to all these organizations, there must be more to say about them and their varieties. The “decentralization” label, gaining increasing prominence as an umbrella term (see e.g., Lee, 2024; Reineke et al., 2025; Salovaara et al., 2024), hence misses (some of) the essence of what makes different (new) organizational forms special.

Summary

Beyond an optimistic conceptualization of “new organizational forms” as novel *configurations* of organizational features, the conceptual notion itself appears to be *underspecified*, *overused*, and *performative*. Likewise, a considerable amount of the newness ascribed to “new organizational forms” seems *contextually bound*, *historically blind*, or *mainly rhetorical*. The new forms concept and related labels seem prone to dynamics of *new-washing* and *mythification*. The extant conceptual language—focused on a structuralist understanding of organization(s)—overlooks a broad range of enabling factors for coordinating collective effort in “new organizational forms” beyond bureaucratic procedures and hierarchical structures, including various *sensemaking devices*, a shared *Menschenbild*, and the *situatedness* of assumptions, purposes, principles, and practices.

7. People-positive organizing

Following up on the aim of this thesis, in this chapter I propose people-positive organizing as an alternative perspective for understanding “new organizational forms” in more nuanced, imaginative, and practically relevant ways. In section 7.1, three main constituents of a people-positive perspective on organizing are outlined: *Menschenbild* as a point of departure for organizational inquiry; the assumptions about humans and the world engrained in a people-positive perspective; and the conceptual language it entails. Next, in section 7.2 the implications of a people-positive perspective for both organizational study and practice are delineated, sketching four pathways for re-interpreting, re-imagining, and re-doing organization(s). Finally, section 7.3 critically reflects on the proposed people-positive perspective, acknowledging ways in which it may hamper the nuanced, imaginative, and practically relevant understanding of “new organizational forms” it intends to support.

7.1. Constituents of a people-positive perspective

7.1.1. *Menschenbild as point of departure for organizational inquiry*

This thesis suggests *Menschenbild* as a fruitful, other-than-structural point of departure for inquiring into organization(s) broadly and “new organizational forms” specifically. The assumptions we hold about human beings—our *Menschenbild*—have the performative power to become “self-fulfilling” (Ferraro et al., 2005), to influence what people do and how they relate to one another (e.g., Bregman, 2021; Dobbin et al., 1993; Drucker, 2001; Ferraro et al., 2005; Gagné & Hewett, 2025a; Kraus, 1980; Miles & Creed, 1995; Rocha & Ghoshal, 2006). As asserted by Herbert Simon (1985, p. 303), “nothing is more fundamental in setting our research agenda and informing our research methods than our view of the nature of the human beings whose behavior we are studying”.

Given this performative power of *Menschenbild*, it seems surprising how little consideration is given to assumptions about human beings in most organization and management studies. The assumptions of *homo economicus*—of human the (boundedly) “rational self-interest maximizer[]” (Ghoshal, 2005, p. 82) as grounded in a “philosophy of radical individualism” (p. 84)—continue to be taken for granted in much organizational scholarship and practice (Barley & Kunda, 1992; Fiske, 1992; Ghoshal, 2005; Kraus, 1980; Petriglieri, 2020b). In organizational practice, the spirit of *homo economicus* is epitomized by the continued prevalence of timesheets and KPIs, algorithmic controls and performance bonuses (see e.g., Bregman, 2021; de Vaujany et al., 2021). In popular strands of organizational theory—from agency theory to transaction cost economics, from the industrial organization view to systems theory—employees are at best regarded as inherently lazy, egoistic, calculating creatures who need to be extrinsically motivated and controlled to act in the organization’s interest (ironically, by some magically superior race of human beings called “managers”); at worst, they are regarded as “cogs in a machine”, as less capable gorillas (Taylor, 1911; Weber, 1922; for line of argumentation see also e.g., Barley & Kunda, 1992; Ghoshal, 2005).

The spirit of *homo economicus*—at least implicitly—remains unquestioned in much of the “new organizational forms” discourse, as exemplified by the prominence of Puranam et al.’s (2014, pp. 164–165) work which builds explicitly on the assumptions of bounded rationality

and self-interest. As such, many new form proponents largely take this Menschenbild for granted; to them, uncertain and complex environments of today simply make it more effective to organize in a “less-hierarchical”, “self-managing”, and/or “agile” manner (Kühl, 2020).

Although the Human Relations and Human Resources traditions helped establish a view of humans as inherently social rather than purely individualistic beings, they largely remained grounded in an instrumental, negative Menschenbild (Miles & Creed, 1995; O’Connor, 1999).²⁸ It was only in a recent point-counterpoint issue in the *Journal of Management Studies* (Gagné & Hewett, 2025a; Leroy, 2025; Shaw, 2025) that the debate about the impact of our assumptions about human beings and their motivations was (re-)opened, contrasting self-determination theory (Deci et al., 2017; Deci & Ryan, 1987, 2000)—popular mostly within organizational psychology and behavior literature—and its implications with those of agency theory (which, explicitly, builds on the image of humans as boundedly rational self-interest maximizers).

This thesis argues that the Menschenbild of humans as boundedly rational self-interest maximizers holds the new organizational forms discourse back from reaching its potential (cf. Kühl, 2020), for several reasons—two descriptive and one normative. From a descriptive perspective, the structuralist paradigm (seeking a stable, certain world) and the associated Menschenbild of humans as boundedly rational self-interest maximizers are arguably not adequate, at least anymore (Ilinitich et al., 1996; Livijn, 2019; Mandalaki & Fotaki, 2020). In that regard, Drucker (1998) argued almost 30 years ago that “most of our assumptions about business, technology and organization are at least 50 years old. They have outlived their time.” Also, several scholars outlined that the notion of humans’ unlimited self-interest fails to explain much of human behavior in organizational contexts (Brunsson, 1989; Ferraro et al., 2005; Gagné & Hewett, 2025a; Ghoshal, 2005; Jensen et al., 2014; Levine & Prietula, 2014; Rocha & Ghoshal, 2006; Selznick, 1994; Vollar & Ostrom, 2010). These scholars claim that humans are complex creatures, capable of cooperative social behavior—something the notion of unlimited self-interest cannot explain (Gagné & Hewett, 2025a; Levine & Prietula, 2014; Vollar & Ostrom, 2010).

From a normative perspective, assumptions should never become taken-for-granted but always remain open to being challenged, particularly in light of their performative power to change the social world (Bregman, 2021; Morgan, 1980; Selznick, 1994). The extant Menschenbild of homo economicus arguably dehumanizes people and organizations (Petriglieri, 2020; Selznick, 1994; Weber, 1922), therewith limiting our imagination regarding the ethical potentials of organizing beyond existing power structures (Bregman, 2021; Kraus, 1980; Mandalaki & Fotaki, 2020; Narayanan et al., 2021; Petriglieri, 2020b; Rocha & Ghoshal, 2006). After all, “a company with intrinsically motivated employees has no need of managers” (Bregman, 2021, p. 19). In light of the dehumanizing experience it can be to live and work within organizational contexts, a distinctly “human” perspective on (new) organizational forms seems appropriate (Greenfield, 1973; Kraus, 1980; Narayanan et al., 2021; Petriglieri, 2020b).

Surely, organization broadly, and new organizational forms specifically, are not only about assumptions. However, if our Menschenbild is holding us back from developing “better”

²⁸ Mayo (1919, p. 16), for instance, believed in the “fundamental rottenness” of human beings, to be civilized by (somehow not-so-rotten) managers.

organization theory and practice—as the arguments above seem to imply—why would we not try and put the performative power of assumptions to our advantage (see also Bregman, 2021; Gouldner, 1955; Hesch, 1997; Narayanan et al., 2021; Rocha & Ghoshal, 2006; Selznick, 1994)? What if we surmounted the dominant dualistic conception of individualism versus communism (Barley & Kunda, 1992; Lawler et al., 2009; Selznick, 1994) to unstuck the theorizing and practice of “new organizational forms”? What if we believed that “people are fundamentally sociable” (Fiske, 1992, p. 689), without denying that they are “at the same time, genuinely self-preserving” (Selznick, 1994, p. 183)? In the words of Graeber and Wengrow (2021, p. 9): “What if we treat people, from the beginning, as imaginative, intelligent, playful creatures who deserve to be understood as such?”

7.1.2. *People-positive assumptions and a processual-relational worldview*

Picking up on related claims from the NWoW practitioner movement (cf. sub-section 6.1.2), the alternative perspective proposed in this thesis is rooted in a Menschenbild that is explicitly “people-positive” (Dignan, 2019). In contrast to extant assumptions of homo economicus, a people-positive Menschenbild conceives of humans as inherently capable, responsible, trustworthy, and social beings (de Morree, 2021; Dignan, 2019; Laloux, 2014). Following a people-positive Menschenbild, human beings can be trusted to solve problems locally together; they are capable of collaborative, altruistic behavior—of doing things with a greater purpose, rather than just their own immediate good, in mind (cf. Bregman, 2021; Fiske, 1992; Hesch, 1997; Rocha & Ghoshal, 2006).

Within the NWoW movement, expressions of a people-positive Menschenbild are commonly embedded in a processual-relational worldview (cf. Follett, 1941). In a world perceived as inherently dynamic and uncertain—as always on the move—change is to be embraced rather than avoided (Breidenbach & Rollow, 2019; Carney & Getz, 2016; Dignan, 2019; Minnaar & de Morree, 2019). In the interaction with the world and other human beings, the focus for NWoW practitioners consequently shifts from limitations to possibilities—from “deficiencies” to “strengths” (Laloux, 2014). “Psychological resources” like trust, solidarity, power, or leadership are not perceived as scarce but as abundantly available, limited only by human imagination and behavior (cf. also Kraus, 1980; Laloux, 2014; Miles & Creed, 1995). As such, the NWoW movement seems characterized by assumptions which are not only “people-positive” but also “world-positive” (or “world-affirming”; cf. Rosa, 2016).

In the eyes of practitioners from the NWoW movement, organizations departing from a people-positive Menschenbild change how people relate to one another—making their interactions more trustful, more intense, and more collaborative. In this context, consider for instance the story of Koldo Saratxaga and the transformation of Spanish bus manufacturer Irizar under his CEO tenure, the success of which he attributed to his “ner” business philosophy, short for “nuevo estilo de relaciones”—or “new style of relationships” (de Morree, 2017). Interaction and discussion between capable, informed, and responsible individuals here are seen as critical organizational success factors. New sets of presumably “soft” skills which are seldomly honed within traditional hierarchical organizations—taking initiative and responsibility, dealing with uncertainty and complexity, communicating openly, making effective group decisions—

become of particularly high demand within the NWoW movement (Breidenbach & Rollow, 2019).

A people-positive Menschenbild, in essence, embraces a more holistic view of human beings and their relationships within our world. We humans are not purely rational, calculating creatures but also consist of our social relationships, emotions, and more—and that is how we should treat each other in social contexts, including organizations (Fiske, 1992; Gagné & Hewett, 2025a; Laloux, 2014; Petriglieri, 2020a). From a people-positive perspective, humans are the solution, not the problem (cf. Petriglieri, 2020a). Social relationships become the crucial determinant of organizational success (cf. Follett, 1941). Accordingly, “organization” is not viewed as an entity/actor with a predefined purpose of maximizing profits for the presumed benefit of everyone’s individual freedom (see especially Friedman, 1962), but rather as a social technology designable “by humans for humans” (Puranam, 2024, p. 54) to achieve a variety of shared, evolving purposes advancing the prosperity of humanity and the world more holistically (see e.g., Meyer & Höllerer, 2014; Selznick, 1994; Walsh et al., 2006).

7.1.3. *People-positive organizing: Towards a new conceptual language*

In their inaugural editorial for the *Organization Science* journal, Daft and Lewin (1990, p. 1) encouraged organization scholars to “break out of the normal science straitjacket”, moving beyond the investigation of long-established concepts and phenomena. Three years later, they called for a “paradigm shift” to be able to explain the emerging “new organizational forms” (Daft & Lewin, 1993). Yet another 15 years later, Daft and Lewin (2008) had to admit that this ambition was still unfulfilled. We still need to “develop new vocabulary to describe what is new” regarding new organizational forms (Billinger & Workiewicz, 2019, p. 5). Describing “new organizational forms” with a vocabulary of structure cannot be the (only) answer (cf. Yoo et al., 2006).

Consequently, the aim of this thesis—proposing an alternative perspective for understanding “new organizational forms” in more nuanced, imaginative, and practically relevant ways—urges researchers to question the usefulness of current conceptualizations for capturing what “new organizational forms” are actually about. As aforementioned, the “new organizational forms” notion spotlights the *structural* features of organization (see e.g., Cattani et al., 2003; Child & McGrath, 2001; Puranam et al., 2014). Resulting characterizations of new forms often stick with the language of the structuralist paradigm: *less-hierarchical*, *self-managing*, *de-centralized*, therewith portraying traditional managerial hierarchy as their antithesis. Dualistic notions such as centralized versus decentralized, hierarchical versus flat, or bureaucratic versus flexible organizing are conceptual constrictions. Organizations can be both, which makes these notions largely misleading (Farjoun, 2010; Follett, 1941; Kärreman & Alvesson, 2004; Luhmann, 2000; Rylander Eklund & Simpson, 2020). Such conceptual oppositions focus our attention on aspects quite different from those commonly brought up among practitioners such as assumptions, purposes, principles, and practices. In other words, the current structural vocabulary does *not* encourage us “to change the terms through which organizations and organizational subjects are speakable, thinkable and apprehendable” (Cabantous et al., 2016, p. 209). What else could we see if we interpreted organization broadly, and “new organizational

forms” specifically, from a different perspective, within a different paradigm, with a different conceptual language (see also Styhre, 2001, 2007)?

The people-positive perspective proposed in this thesis rethinks organization(s) broadly and “new organizational forms” specifically in other-than-structural terms, offering components for a new conceptual language. With the concept of *Menschenbild* as an alternative point of departure for organizational inquiry, scholars can discern different organizations (or “organizational forms”)—with all their purposes, principles, and practices (or even structures)—based on the assumptions about human beings they are founded upon. The notion of *people-positivity* relatedly establishes a *Menschenbild* which can see eye to eye with the dominant image of *homo economicus*, conceiving of humans as inherently social, capable, and trustworthy beings.

People-positive organizing, then, captures organizing which is rooted in a people-positive *Menschenbild*. In other words, people-positive organizing is about people doing things together to achieve common goals based on the shared assumption that they can trust each other to solve problems locally through collaboration.

The point with a people-positive perspective on organizing is not to say that all human beings are inherently and only good, all the time. Human nature seems much more complex than that. The point is twofold: empirically (and descriptively), to pick up on the notion of “people-positivity” as frequently brought up in the practitioner discourse, particularly within the NWoW movement (see sub-section 7.1.2); and conceptually (and normatively), to challenge extant assumptions of humans as boundedly rational self-interest maximizers and see what would happen if instead, when in doubt, we generally assumed the good in people (cf. Ghoshal, 2005; Morgan, 1980; Selznick, 1994).

7.2. Implications of a people-positive perspective

Adopting a people-positive perspective on organizing holds implications for both researchers and practitioners. For researchers, it offers a *lens* for re-interpreting what organization(s) broadly, and “new organizational forms” specifically, *are* about. For practitioners, it offers an *invitation* to re-imagine and re-do what organization(s) broadly, and “new organizational forms” specifically, *could be* about. Overall, the proposed people-positive perspective is argued to support an understanding of “new organizational forms” in more nuanced, imaginative, and practically relevant ways. In this section, four pathways towards a more nuanced, imaginative, and practically relevant understanding are discussed: organizing differently, not less (see sub-section 7.2.1); organizing as ethical, human-centered practice (see sub-section 7.2.2); moving beyond the individual–collective divide (see sub-section 7.2.3); and coordinating anew by turning from less-hierarchical to people-positive organizing (see sub-section 7.2.4). These pathways, as argued in this thesis, connect to existing scholarly ideas while simultaneously opening up for a more nuanced, imaginative, and practically relevant understanding of “new organizational forms” (and, possibly, also of organization[s] more broadly).

7.2.1. *Organizing differently, not less*

Extant descriptions of “new organizational forms” largely operate from an entitative worldview and adopt a structuralist language (Gergen, 2009; Kornberger, 2022; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980;

Stout, 2012), thereby focusing on what these new forms are moving *away* from: *post-bureaucratic*, *less-hierarchical*, *self-managing*, *de-centralized*. The concept of *Menschenbild* offers an alternative baseline for assessing possibilities and desirabilities of “new organizational forms”, allowing us to capture nuances in assumptions and related purposes, principles, and practices which current theorizing does not emphasize. Broadly speaking, different approaches to organizing depart from different value bases—from different assumptions—and should be evaluated accordingly (cf. Rothschild-Whitt, 1979). From a *Menschenbild* perspective specifically, organizing efforts from the NWoW movement may be characterized as “people-positive” rather than as “self-managing”, “less-hierarchical”, “agile”, and/or “decentralized”.

As such, the notion of people-positive organizing does not overstress the “newness” of “organizational forms” for its own sake (cf. Schaefer & Hallonsten, 2024), while still offering a lens to recognize differences between them. As alluded to by EL Khoury et al. (2024), some “new organizational forms” are more humanistic—or more people-positive—than others. Unlike Teal organizations (Laloux, 2014) or liberated companies (Carney & Getz, 2016), Holacratic organizations (Robertson, 2015) for instance place trust in processes and roles rather than people (cf. EL Khoury et al., 2024; Farkhondeh & Müller, 2021). Similarly, in the sense that platforms and DAOs aspire to be “trustless” systems (Bernstein et al., 2022; Brekke et al., 2021), they try to eliminate human judgment from the organizing equation (rather than encouraging it). If anything, they trust in technology, not people. Particularly digital platforms like Amazon or Uber and the wider gig economy have been criticized for their neoliberalist excesses, intense surveillance practices, and worker exploitation (de Vaujany et al., 2021; Morozov, 2013; Schultze & Bhappu, 2022; Zuboff, 2019), hardly being associable with people-positive organizing. The *Menschenbild* inherent in such organizations appears starkly different from that shared at organizations like Buurtzorg or Morning Star. While current theorizing tends to put these and other organizational forms into the same decentralization bucket (cf. Bernstein et al., 2022; Bousquet, 2012; Hsieh et al., 2018; Keshtiban et al., 2021; Lee & Edmondson, 2017; Vergne, 2020), a *Menschenbild* perspective can appreciate differences between them along dimensions which extant perspectives do not allow us to see. From a *Menschenbild* perspective, Buurtzorg for instance may have more in common with some “alternative” organizations (cf. D’Antone et al., 2024; Parker et al., 2014a; Vijay et al., 2025)—or volunteer-driven organizations like local soup kitchens or Alcoholics Anonymous, for that matter (cf. Laloux, 2014; Resch, 2019)—than with many “decentralized”, “self-managing” organizations (cf. Lee, 2024; Lee & Edmondson, 2017).

Overall, the novelty and distinctiveness of “new organizational forms”—particularly, their supposedly “decentralized” authority structures—seems overestimated. Upon closer investigation, the people-positive *Menschenbild* engrained in many contemporary organizing efforts—and the purposes, principles, and practices it nurtures—though distinct from dominant organizational theorizing and practice, likewise appears more “old” or “classical” than it seems “new to the world” or “revolutionary” (cf. du Gay, 2000; du Gay & Vikkelsø, 2017; Follett, 1941; Graeber & Wengrow, 2021). Assumptions, purposes, principles, practices, and even structures are—or at least, should be—inherently *situated* (and hence “new”, or rather, “specific”) in their local context. With that, “new organizational forms” are about *organizing differently, not less* (cf. also du Gay & Vikkelsø, 2017). Beyond *situatedness*, this thesis pointed

at *sensemaking devices* and a shared (people-positive) *Menschenbild* as enabling the coordination of collective effort beyond bureaucratic procedures and hierarchical structures. These enabling factors, as argued in this thesis, hold the potential to (re)humanize organization(s) (cf. Greenfield, 1973; Kraus, 1980; Narayanan et al., 2021; Petriglieri, 2020b; Puranam, 2024), supporting its practical relevance.

From a *Menschenbild* perspective, people-positive organizing may be different from managerial hierarchy and related structuralist approaches—but it is far from being a “new” organizational form. Labels and concepts like Agile, Holacracy, or DAO may come and go, but organizing differently from managerial hierarchy is a longstanding and enduring—a distinctly human—possibility (cf. Graeber & Wengrow, 2021; Puranam, 2024). The *Menschenbild* concept helps us acknowledge people-positive organizing as one such possibility.

7.2.2. *Organizing as ethical, human-centered practice*

The assumptions associated with a people-positive *Menschenbild* hold crucial implications for how we organize collective effort, for the “organizational form” we adopt. The idea of people-positive organizing, as this thesis contends, can consequently (re-)establish and ground organizing as an *ethical, human-centered* practice—an understanding which seems to gain traction in emerging scholarly discussions. Several scholars have recently recognized the importance of a people-positive *Menschenbild* (and a related organizing philosophy) for the success of “new organizational forms” (EL Khoury et al., 2024; Gagné & Hewett, 2025a; Martela & Nandram, 2025; Melé, 2005; Resch, 2019; Soetens & Huybrechts, 2023; Townsend & Romme, 2024). These scholars variously describe organizations based on more “human”, “humanist”, “human-centric”, or “human-centered” values (Diefenbach, 2020; EL Khoury et al., 2024; Hamel & Zanini, 2020; Laasch et al., 2025; Narayanan et al., 2021; Petriglieri, 2020b, 2020a; Puranam, 2024; Selznick, 1994; Townsend & Romme, 2024).

For instance, much in line with insights from this thesis, Townsend and Romme (2024) subsume under “the emerging concept of the human-centered organization” (p. 53) different organizing approaches which “treat people as innately motivated problem-solvers, who are capable of enjoying work and willing to accept responsibility” (p. 54), characterizing these approaches through their humanistic values, common good purpose, positive human experiences, team structure, as well as participatory practices and tools. In that respect, EL Khoury et al. (2024) outline that different concepts from the “new organizational forms” discourse vary regarding the extent to which they build on a “humanist” culture and values. Whereas organization and management theories building on the *Menschenbild* of humans as boundedly rational self-interest maximizers largely promote a separation of organization (theory) from moral values and ethical considerations (cf. Simon, 1947), human-centered (or people-positive) organizing reinvokes a view of ethics as inseparably embedded in any personal and social life (cf. EL Khoury et al., 2024; Townsend & Romme, 2024). As even economists start to acknowledge (see Bernacchio & Foss, 2024), organization should be regarded as an *ethical* (and hence normative) rather than purely rational (and hence descriptive) practice and science (Melé, 2005; Selznick, 1994). After all, humans can also be conceived of as moral beings, not just economic ones (cf. Kornberger, 2022).

Conversely, Puranam (2024) views “human-centric” organizations more instrumentally as those which satisfy people’s intrinsic needs within the contemporary “work experience” (what Puranam calls people’s “organizational context preferences”). His list of needs/preferences heavily draws on self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1987) yet (strangely) sticks with Simon’s (1955) assumption of bounded rationality, thereby adopting a *Menschenbild* which seems incompatible with self-determination theory (cf. Deci & Vansteenkiste, 2004; Gagné & Hewett, 2025a). Unlike Townsend and Romme (2024) yet similar to Puranam (2024), Hamel and Zanini’s (2020) characterization of “humanocracy” (in contrast to “bureaucracy”) focuses little on the assumptions, purposes, practices, and experiences associated with (people-positive) organizing; it instead promotes a (seemingly) more instrumental “freeing” of employees and their “human spirit” within a hyper-entrepreneurial society.²⁹

Long before recent interest in human-centered organizing approaches, Miles and Creed (1995, p. 360) already outlined a new “Human Investment Philosophy”, based on a “belief in essentially unlimited human potential” and “trustworthiness”. Even earlier, Kraus (1980, p. 18) claimed that new organizational forms “assume[] people are inherently good, want to be productive, and can utilize an organizational system to further their own ends as well as those of the organization”. Such ideals are deeply engrained in classical pragmatist thought as well, rejecting the idea of *homo economicus* as “pure mythology” (Dewey, 1946, p. 160) and instead promoting “faith in humanity” (Follett, 1918, p. 156). Even Graeber and Wengrow’s (2021) extensive study of human (organizational) history shows clear traces of a people-positive *Menschenbild* inherent in several pre-industrial organizing efforts. As such, concepts like “human-centered” (Townsend & Romme, 2024) and “human-centric” organizations (Puranam, 2024), same as “humanocracy” (Hamel & Zanini, 2020)—or “people-positive organizing”, for that matter—largely seem like “new” expressions of “old” ideas and assumptions.

Overall, people-positive organizing fosters imagination by urging us to flip the script, using the performative power of assumptions to our advantage in the design(ing) of organization(s) (cf. Bregman, 2021; Hesch, 1997; Narayanan et al., 2021; Rocha & Ghoshal, 2006; Selznick, 1994). With its conceptual repertoire, people-positive organizing adopts a (widely advocated) political stance on (the study of) organization (cf. Battilana & Beckman, 2025; Cabantous et al., 2016; O’Connor, 1999, 2001; Polanyi, 2001; Selznick, 1994)—it can “change the terms through which organizations and organizational subjects are speakable, thinkable and apprehendable” (Cabantous et al., 2016, p. 209). As such, people-positive organizing calls for everybody’s awareness of and reflection on the impacts of organizing on people and power dynamics; it may “free” us from “an instrumental or impersonal logic” of (organizational) life (Selznick, 1994, p. 256). A people-positive *Menschenbild* essentially demands the reintroduction of ethical considerations into (the study of) organization (cf. Adler et al., 2007; Selznick, 1994; Tsoukas et al., 2024), making human wellbeing a normative aspiration for any organizing approach (cf. EL Khoury et al., 2024; Gagné & Hewett, 2025a; Petriglieri, 2020b). People-positive organizing may therefore allow people to reconnect with the world and each other, to slow

²⁹ It is no surprise that the “humanocracy” concept strongly draws on the case of Haier with its market competition-based structure of micro enterprises, given that Gary Hamel took a prominent role in designing and promoting the company’s (re-)organization.

down the cut-throat pace of an increasingly instrumentalized society, and to re-instill a sense of community (cf. Kärreman et al., 2021; Lawler et al., 2009; Rosa, 2016; Selznick, 1994).

7.2.3. *Moving beyond the individual–collective divide*

The Menschenbild of homo economicus presents a seemingly insurmountable dilemma to organization (design) theory and practice: How can individuals—aiming to maximize their own interests—be motivated to contribute effectively to the pursuit of collective organizational goals? Much attention in the “new organizational forms” discourse has been directed towards the seemingly paradoxical demands for both individual autonomy and organizational control (see e.g., Barker, 1993; Rennstam & Kärreman, 2020; van Baarle et al., 2021). The same goes for organization and management studies more broadly (see e.g., Adler & Borys, 1996; Feldman, 1989; Raelin, 1985). Indeed, debates about individualism versus collectivism are foundational in much (if not most) sociological, psychological, anthropological, political, philosophical, and economic thought.³⁰

The answer to the question of motivation engrained in most organizational and management thought and practice, at least through the 20th century, seemed to be financial incentives and hierarchical *control* (see e.g., Friedman, 1962; Jensen & Meckling, 1976; Taylor, 1911; cf. Gagné & Hewett, 2025a). In “new organizational forms”, the script appears to be flipped; one of the key promises entailed in “less-hierarchical”, “self-managing”, and “agile” organizing is increased individual *autonomy* (see e.g., Köhl, 2020; Lee & Edmondson, 2017; Martela, 2019). Organizational and work-related promises of autonomy may reflect broader societal developments as “human lives are becoming more and more transactional, individualized, or market-oriented and less and less relationally and socially oriented” (Lawler et al., 2009, p. xiii; see already Selznick, 1994).

To many, autonomy is the cure against alienation, disempowerment, and disengagement in contemporary society (see e.g., Berardi, 2009; Deci & Ryan, 2000); and “new organizational forms” offer such autonomy in response to workers’ supposed calls for meaning, purpose, and empowerment (cf. Lee & Edmondson, 2017), often tied to the desirable image of workers as intrinsically motivated entrepreneurs (Hamel & Zanini, 2020; see also de Vaujany et al., 2021; du Gay, 2000). This widely spread emphasis on, and enthusiasm about, autonomy is regarded as problematic in this thesis. This is especially the case when autonomy gets equated with individualism and independence (as common in neoliberalist interpretations; cf. sub-section 6.1.2), leading to a dualistic opposition between individual interests for autonomy and organizational interests for control and alignment.

Surely, alternative conceptualizations of autonomy exist. Self-determination theory (SDT), for instance, emphasizes humans’ innate desires for values-based self-organization yet allows (if not advocates) for their interdependence (cf. Chirkov et al., 2003; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Gagné & Hewett, 2025a); it acknowledges autonomy as one of three foundational psychological needs humans have, next to competence and relatedness. Much like people-positive organizing, SDT hence views humans as fundamentally social, capable, and trustworthy beings (see Deci & Vansteenkiste, 2004). However, in an individualized society in which what is “ethical” and

³⁰ To name but a few, consider for instance the works and ideas of Hobbes, Marx, Tönnies, or Smith.

“good” is largely defined at an individual level (cf. Rosa, 2016; Selznick, 1994), competence risks getting quantified and relatedness risks getting left aside.

In the context of the “new organizational forms” discourse specifically, calls for autonomy and emancipation from the “shackles” of bureaucracy/managerial hierarchy may be viewed as little more than myths hiding subtle attempts at seizing the “unmanaged” for purposes of control (du Gay, 2000; Gabriel, 1995; Köhl, 2020). As such, SDT—with its explicit emphasis on the autonomy of the “self” (as in, *self-determination theory*)—risks being misinterpreted and/or misused. Any conception of “autonomy”, at least implicitly and etymologically, entails an overemphasis on the “self” as subject.

The people-positive perspective on organizing advanced in this thesis intends to move beyond the individual–collective divide, beyond debates about autonomy versus control. Organizing (differently) is both an individual and a collective endeavor (cf. Vijay et al., 2025). From a people-positive perspective, people can be trusted to collaboratively solve problems as a group, bringing their individual needs, skills, and perspectives to the table while pursuing collective goals far beyond their own interests. In that regard, members of the NWoW movement seem to largely advocate an interpretation of organization as *community* (cf. Follett, 1941; see also Adler, 2001; Selznick, 1994)—a process of mutual becoming—rather than in terms of a static, hierarchical, machine-like structure.³¹ Coordination, here, emerges from people doing things together—not as independent actors in a boundaryless (organizational) world (cf. Bergmann, 1990, 2004; Corporate Rebels, 2025; Shymko & Frémeaux, 2022) but as capable, trustworthy, and responsible members in an interdependent web of relationships. In that regard, the notion of community (and related organizational forms and approaches) explicitly acknowledges the dual need for both individualism and collectivism, for both autonomy and relatedness (cf. Kokkinidis, 2015; Ostrom, 2011; Wheatley & Kellner-Rogers, 1998).

In bringing individualism and collectivism together, three aspects stand out about organizing efforts from the NWoW movement. First, many contemporary organizations encourage people to show up to work in their *wholeness*—with all their “personal” beliefs, worries, joys, and fears, not just their “rational” professional self (Laloux, 2014; Petriglieri, 2020a).³² Following Selznick (1994), interacting as whole people is a deeply human need that gets suppressed in a society increasingly segmented into separate instrumental spheres. Such encouragement of holistic human interactions stands in stark contrast not only to the established bureaucratic form (du Gay, 2000; Weber, 1922) but also to some new organizational forms such as egalitarian communes (Fiske, 1992; Kanter, 1972) and Holacracy (Farkhondeh & Müller, 2021; Robertson, 2015): Rather than advocating wholeness, these forms promote the *depersonalization* of work and consequently try to reduce the role of the individual and the perception of individual differences to a minimum for the benefit of the group.

³¹ This thought is adapted from paper IV.

³² At Zenseact for instance, individual differences are celebrated and interactions as whole people are encouraged in various ways, such as by sharing emotions on open Slack channels (#whine, #satisfaction), hosting monthly cultural fikas (cf. paper III), or having a strong presence at the yearly Pride Parade in Gothenburg.

Second, the ambition for contemporary organizing should be *bounded* (rather than boundaryless) autonomy.³³ Many contemporary organizations seem to reject libertarian understandings of autonomy/freedom as total independence from others and their demands. In the eyes of Frithjof Bergmann (1990, 2004), founder of the German New Work movement, autonomy should not be understood as being able to do anything you like without consequences, but as being able to have an impact on your life and the world—to do what you find important and meaningful. As such, autonomy and freedom should be understood in a substantive rather than purely formal-legal sense (Graeber & Wengrow, 2021). As also acknowledged in existing literature, successful self-organization requires active cultivation, not a plain declaration of everybody's boundaryless autonomy (cf. Smith & Graetz, 2006; Tonellato et al., 2024; Wenger & Snyder, 2000).

In the spirit of bounded autonomy, structures and rules *can* enhance autonomy (see also Eisenhardt & Sull, 2001; Lee & Edmondson, 2017; Okhuysen & Eisenhardt, 2002). They can enable “freedom within a framework” (Gulati, 2018, p. 71), for instance by providing “order-generating rules” which “set strict boundaries that cannot be exceeded, but allow many possibilities within their confines” (Smith & Graetz, 2006, p. 862). Even at the individual level, autonomy can benefit from being partnered with guidance and support (Gagné & Hewett, 2025a). As expressed by Selznick (1994, p. 144), “[f]reedom is incompatible with certain kinds of order, but it is wholly dependent on stabilities and continuities of many sorts”. The perceived tension between individual autonomy and organizational control, between individual and collective concerns, may hence be fruitfully approached from an attitude of *integration* (Follett, 1941), striving for a relational understanding of freedom/autonomy in the sense of “*interdependent individualism*” (cf. Adler, 2022a). As also the notion of wholeness implies, stressing interdependence and the collective does not have to imply suppressing individual needs, ideas, and emotions.

Finally, another particularity about “new organizational forms” which has largely evaded scholarly discussion is their link to *spirituality* (for an exception, see Nandram et al., 2025). The role of spirituality is most acknowledged for Teal organizations (Laloux, 2014) as well as for parts of the German New Work movement (Breidenbach & Rollow, 2019). Laloux (2014), godfather of the NWoW movement, explicitly positions spirituality as a critical dimension of his model of evolutionary breakthroughs in human organization. Many stories in the related practitioner communities—such as those encountered at the “Teal Around The World” practitioner conference in 2022—entail personal transformation journeys of people who, after “not being themselves” for most of their life, claim to have found their “inner calling”, “discovered” their “purpose”, connected with a “higher level” of their “consciousness”. Some returned deeply changed from encounters with Benedictine monks, meditation practices, or Buddhist philosophy. To many, such people, practices, and philosophies offer an escape from the individualist Western (business) life. Regardless of whether you view such ideas as the epitome of the “quasi-religious” mumbo jumbo engrained in “new organizational forms” (cf. du Gay, 2000) or take them seriously (cf. Nandram et al., 2025), they seem to have a non-

³³ In that regard, consider also the following quote from an interview with a Zenseact employee: “You need to have a little bit more coordination. Not 100% freedom for teams and these things. There have to be boundaries. Within those boundaries, you can be creative, but you shouldn't go outside those boundaries.”

negligible impact on a considerable amount of people and their ambitions to organize differently from managerial hierarchy.

7.2.4. *From less-hierarchical to people-positive organizing: Coordinating anew*
From the vantage point of organization design, a people-positive perspective on organizing may be contrasted against the dominant structuralist interpretation as inherent in characterizations such as “less-hierarchical”, “self-managing”, and “decentralized” organizing—particularly with regards to how collective effort is being coordinated. People-positive organizing—much like most organization (design) theory (Galbraith, 1974; Jarzabkowski et al., 2012; Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967; March & Simon, 1958; Mintzberg, 2023; Okhuysen & Bechky, 2009; Puranam et al., 2014)—views *coordination* as the central organizational issue. However, a people-positive approach fundamentally shifts both *what* is being coordinated and *how* it is being coordinated.

Regarding the *what*, people-positive organizing moves from the coordination of *resources* (and related activities) to the coordination of people and their *experiences* (Follett, 1941; Selznick, 1994). In a structuralist paradigm, resources are assumed to be scarce, hence requiring rational coordination of who “owns”/controls what. Everything is viewed as a quantifiable, exchangeable resource: raw materials, machines, products, services, time, money, even people (“human resources”). When focusing on the coordination of resources and how best to control and exchange them, only hierarchy and market seem like viable organizational forms (cf. Williamson, 1975). A people-positive *Menschenbild*—viewing humans as inherently social, capable, and trustworthy beings—instead shifts the focus to human relationships and collaboration and how to foster them (Fiske, 1992; Follett, 1941; Gergen, 2009; Kanter, 1972; Kraus, 1980; Polanyi, 2001; Selznick, 1994). The focus turns to the coordination of human experiences (Follett, 1941), with coordination becoming an interdependent, relational process (Bechky, 2006; Faraj & Xiao, 2006; Follett, 1949; Gittell & Douglass, 2012). In the words of Selznick (1994, p. 183, emphases added), “the most important aspects of the *human condition*, viewed in the light of *moral experience*, are the *nature and quality of social participation*”.

Regarding the *how*, when viewing the world as inherently uncontrollable and (psychological) resources as abundant, coordination of resources through hierarchical structures and procedural rules does not seem fruitful. Coordination, here, is not an administrative function to be fulfilled by certain managers or departments; instead, fostering natural human collaboration and relationships between all people embedded in the organizational setting, by establishing nurturing conditions for “social participation” (Selznick, 1994), gains central importance (Follett, 1941; see also Fulk & DeSanctis, 1995; Hsieh & Vergne, 2022). As already articulated in Daft and Lewin’s (1993, p. IV) call for research on new organizational forms: “In the new world, influence is based on relationships, not things”. The importance and interdependence of people and their relationships therefore needs to be reflected in coordination mechanisms (see also Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1994; Raveendran et al., 2020; Selznick, 1994; Wagner, 2021). As an example, in people-positive organizing, less top-down-driven but more relational and integrative decision-making practices seem to become paramount (Follett, 1941; Gergen, 2009; Kokkinidis, 2015; Luhmann, 2000; Shanahan, 2023). Similarly, people-positive organizing seems to move from procedural *rules* and hierarchical *structures* as main coordination

mechanisms to *principles* and *relationships* (Breidenbach & Rollow, 2019; Fjeldstad et al., 2012; Pietinalho & Martela, 2024; Resch, 2019); it entails “a change from expressing organizational architecture as specific organization structures to expressing it as *principles* by which actors engage in organizational *relationships*” (Fjeldstad et al., 2012, pp. 744–745, emphases in original). In the language of Hsieh and Vergne (2022; as based on Galbraith, 1974, and Okhuysen & Bechky, 2009), people-positive organizing moves from algorithmic and formal social coordination to goal and informal social coordination. As such, new organizational forms may be “less-hierarchical”—but they need to be more than just that to enable effective coordination of collective effort in alternative (e.g., people-positive) ways.

To be sure, rethinking our conceptual language in other-than-structural terms does not imply that we must discredit any efforts aimed at structuring, formalizing—and, indeed, organizing. Despite its frequent mis- and overuse, (structural) formalization can be helpful in making explicit and effective how people work together (see already Freeman, 1972). The conceptual language offered in this thesis—emphasizing for instance the role of sensemaking devices, of (a people-positive) *Menschenbild*, of (the situatedness of) purposes, principles, and practices in coordinating collective effort—aims to reflect the “clearly relational nature” of organization, moving beyond the structural possibilities of “centralization, formalization or divisionalization” (Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1993, pp. 43–44). Such a language makes a broader repertoire of organizing possibilities “speakable, thinkable and apprehendable” (Cabantous et al., 2016, p. 209)—some of them novel, some of them long-known (but possibly forgotten). As such, “[s]elf-organization is not new in our experience of organizations, it just takes different eyes to see it” (Wheatley & Kellner-Rogers, 1996b, p. 23; see also Köhl, 2020; Ostrom, 2011).

7.3. Critically reflecting on a people-positive perspective

The ambition with this thesis and the people-positive perspective on organizing it proposes is to enable people to understand (and relatedly, discuss and design) “new organizational forms” in more nuanced, imaginative, and practically relevant ways. While the preceding section focused on how a people-positive perspective can make us re-interpret, re-imagine, and re-do “new organizational forms” accordingly, this section critically reflects on people-positive organizing and what it may make us overlook, acknowledging its possible blind spots, dangers, and idealizations.

First, people-positive organizing seems easier said than done (literally). It is about more than changing your assumptions and language; people-positivity requires real-life experimentation and needs to manifest in everyday experience to have any practical relevance (cf. Cabantous et al., 2016; Gemmill & Oakley, 1992; Rosa, 2016). Traditional structuralist approaches remain appealing as long as we widely lack practicable alternatives (cf. Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Lee, 2024).

Also, by suggesting people-positive organizing and its associated vocabulary we should not fall for the dogmatic fallacy (Whitehead, 1933); any conceptualization “inevitably gives rise to residual absences, invisibilities and silences” (Tsoukas et al., 2024, p. 1239). For instance, some efforts aimed at organizing differently—despite (or perhaps, because of) proclaiming equality and people-positivity—develop exclusionary and/or oppressive cultures privileging only a few (Battilana et al., 2022; Rothschild-Whitt, 1979; Soetens & Huybrechts, 2023); they may issue

moral imperatives for human behavior far beyond the desirable (cf. Cederström & Spicer, 2015; du Gay, 2000). Also, the notion of people-positivity conceptually undersells the complexity of human beings. Human beings are both egoistic and social, both good and bad—at individual and societal levels (see also Ghoshal, 2005; Selznick, 1994). People-positive organizing insinuates a contrast against “people-negative” organizing; it risks dichotomizing the discussion and, as a result, may lack nuance—just like “post-bureaucratic”, “less-hierarchical”, “self-managing”, and other labels which have come before. As such, it is claimed in this thesis that the notion of people-positivity may be conceptually helpful (perhaps even necessary) for imagining and aspiring to a different organizational theory and practice, despite it turning a blind eye to some human inclinations and behaviors.

Regardless of intentions, people-positive organizing and the human(ist) perspective it promotes risk being instrumentalized. Like other concepts before, people-positivity may be turned into a management idea and, despite being put forth in the name of human betterment, may ultimately get used for instrumental or even dehumanizing purposes (cf. Alexander, 2022; Bruce & Nyland, 2011; Feix & Fischer, 2024; Holt & Wiedner, 2024; Rosa, 2016). As suggested before (cf. sub-section 6.1.1), the leader- and selflessness—the ideal of the autonomous, emancipated, and entrepreneurial employee—commonly ascribed to “new organizational forms” may often be more about employer branding, legitimacy-building, and/or myth-making than being an expression of genuine, altruistic concern for people (David et al., 2013; du Gay, 2000; EL Khoury et al., 2024; Gabriel, 1995; Hallonsten, 2022; Köhl, 2020). Any claims of putting people (employees, customers, “the community”) first should be met with some skepticism, especially if ultimate power and (financial) benefits still accrue with a select few. Relatedly, it seems virtually impossible to differentiate between genuine and instrumental people-positivity—other than by evaluating organizations propagating people-positivity by their (people’s) actions. Still, in the spirit of this thesis, efforts aimed at upholding a human(ist) perspective should generally be invited—especially in a world experiencing a return of libertarianism and authoritarianism as well as an increasing dominance of tech giants (cf. Adler et al., 2023; Battilana & Beckman, 2025; Petriglieri, 2020b; Shestakofsky, 2017; Zuboff, 2019).

Another conceptual narrowing baked into the proposed people-positive approach is the primacy it assigns to coordination as the essence of organizing. As has long been acknowledged, many organizations lack effective coordination and integration—some of which may indeed be intended and/or beneficial (see e.g., Brunsson, 1989; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Similarly, discrepancies between discourse and practice—largely problematized in this thesis—may also be viewed as deliberate and helpful (cf. Brunsson, 1989; Köhl, 2020). In other words, there is more to organization(s) than coordination of collective effort into effective action; organization is a deeply political endeavor (cf. Brunsson, 1989). As mentioned earlier in this chapter though, the people-positive approach articulated in this thesis arguably acknowledges (rather than rejects) the relevance of politics in organization(s). This thesis thus contends that people-positive organizing can provide a multifaceted view on organization(s), despite the shortcomings of “coordination” as a key concept (see even Follett, 1941, p. 300).

Overall, the point of suggesting a perspective on organizing other than the structuralist one is *not* to say that “new organizational forms” are structurally the same as “traditional” forms, or that structures do not matter at all—far from it. Rather, this suggestion shall be understood as

an illustrative reminder of the multitude of interpretive possibilities at our disposal (cf. Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011b; Cabantous et al., 2016). In this regard, the proposed people-positive perspective on organizing offers the culmination of an attempted “reparative critique” of the “new organizational forms” discourse (cf. Alvesson & Spicer, 2025; Sedgwick, 1997). “New organizational forms” might be moving *away* from centralized managerial hierarchy, but they are also moving *towards* something else. As argued in this thesis, this “something else” could be illuminated in more nuanced, imaginative, and practically relevant ways by a people-positive perspective on organizing and its associated conceptual language.

8. Conclusion and implications

8.1. Conclusion

This thesis aimed to propose an alternative perspective for understanding “new organizational forms” in more nuanced, imaginative, and practically relevant ways. In addressing this aim, this thesis utilized insights from three studies—an empirical case study, a literature review study, and a study of the practitioner discourse—and four appended papers.

This thesis advanced a people-positive perspective on organizing, adopting *Menschenbild*—the assumptions we hold about human beings—as an alternative point of departure for organizational inquiry. People-positive organizing is about people doing things together to achieve common goals based on the shared assumption that they can trust each other to solve problems locally through collaboration. As argued in this thesis, a people-positive perspective is not so much concerned with what “new organizational forms” may be moving *away* from—as in, being *post*-bureaucratic, *less*-hierarchical, *self*-managing, *de*-centralized. A people-positive perspective rather provides a possible lens for illuminating what some contemporary organizing efforts may be moving *towards*.

From this vantage point, this thesis offered alternative takes on both the coordination and conceptualization of “new organizational forms”. Regarding the former, this thesis identified a broad repertoire of *sensemaking devices*, a shared (people-positive) *Menschenbild*, and the *situatedness* of assumptions, purposes, principles, and practices as critical enabling factors of coordination. Regarding the latter, this thesis diagnosed the conceptual notion of “new organizational forms”—with its related labels of “less-hierarchical”, “self-managing”, and “agile” organizing—as elusive and possibly problematic, hiding differences in assumptions, purposes, principles, and practices of organizing while exaggerating newness in—and thereby, reifying the prevalence of—structural features. The people-positive perspective advanced in this thesis relatedly offers components for a conceptual language which makes contemporary organization(s) discussable, imaginable, and designable in different—and, as argued, more nuanced, imaginative, and practically relevant—ways than the dominant structuralist perspective allows.

8.2. Academic contributions and future research directions

This thesis provides multiple contributions to the understanding of “new organizational forms”—how they are coordinated and conceptualized—and thereby advances knowledge about contemporary organization(s) and their design. Regarding their conceptualization, this thesis first frames new organizational forms as discrete configurations of organizational features distinguishing them from those of established forms, highlighting five main features associated with new forms (see paper I). For three of the most prominent labels in the current new forms discourse, this thesis further offers conceptual re-interpretations. Accordingly, this thesis views managerial hierarchy as a powerful sensemaking device requiring replacement if removed, hence showing that “*less-hierarchical*” organizing needs to be more than just “less-hierarchical” in its structures to be effective (see paper II). Similarly, this thesis advances an understanding of “self-management” (as in, “*self-managing*” organizations) as an expression of practices (“new ways of working”) guided by a people-positive *Menschenbild* and the principle

of integration, rather than an expression of decentralized authority structures (see paper IV). Concerning “*agile*” organizations, this thesis offers an alternative approach of growing (rather than scaling) agile, articulating (and thereby re-emphasizing the critical role of) assumptions, values, and principles based on the spirit of the original Agile Manifesto (see paper III).

Extending insights from paper IV, this thesis more broadly contributes with a people-positive perspective on organizing, spotlighting the importance of assumptions—especially about human beings (*Menschenbild*)—in how collective effort is coordinated. As argued in this thesis, this perspective facilitates understanding “new organizational forms” in more nuanced, imaginative, and practically relevant ways. It calls attention to dynamics of “new-washing” and mythification—an overemphasis on heroic organizational newness which, on closer inspection, often appears contextually bound, historically blind, or mainly rhetorical—without overlooking the profound alternativity and explicitness in assumptions, purposes, principles, and practices many contemporary organizing efforts entail. Relatedly, this thesis highlights the role of sensemaking devices (paper II), a shared (people-positive) *Menschenbild* (see paper IV), as well as situated principles and practices (paper III) in enabling coordination without bureaucratic procedures and hierarchical structures. Together, the (re-)conceptualizations and insights into “new organizational forms” and their successful coordination offered in this thesis nuance our understanding of contemporary organization(s), addressing related calls for research (see e.g., Joseph & Sengul, 2025; Walsh et al., 2006). More specifically, with the introduction of concepts such as “sensemaking devices”, “*Menschenbild*”, or “people-positive organizing” this thesis addresses calls for an alternative conceptual language to understand “new organizational forms” (see e.g., Billinger & Workiewicz, 2019; Börjesson et al., 2024; Graeber & Wengrow, 2021; Kraus, 1980; Miles & Snow, 1986; Salovaara et al., 2024), working towards redefining “the terms through which organizations and organizational subjects are speakable, thinkable and apprehendable” (Cabantous et al., 2016, p. 209).

Integrating into a broad array of studies on contemporary organization(s) and their design, this thesis and its contributions suggest several directions for future research. First, interesting questions pertain to how the idea(l) of people-positive organizing can be put into practice. What are the contingencies, or practical limits, of people-positive organizing and its associated *Menschenbild*? What are conditions under which it works more or less well? We could suspect, for instance, that the individual-level *Menschenbild*, skill- and mindsets, geographies, and/or organizational types and purposes play a role here (see e.g., Gagné & Hewett, 2025a; Martela, 2019). Similarly, how can conditions for people-positive organizing be nurtured? For instance, how can sensemaking devices be developed? What are the conditions for them fostering coordination successfully (cf. Hsieh & Vergne, 2022; Okhuysen & Bechky, 2009)? Are there other types of sensemaking devices than structures, practices, artifacts, metaphors, and narratives (cf. Maitlis & Christianson, 2014)?

Next, the notion of people-positive organizing advocates a more political or normative study of “new organizational forms”—same as for organization(s) in general. For instance, what are the ethical limits of contemporary organizing efforts; what are their unintended consequences or dark sides (cf. Feix & Fischer, 2024)? In this vein, deeper investigations into the phenomenon of “new-washing” seem necessary (cf. EL Khoury et al., 2024). How can we distinguish

between surface and substance in organizational form newness (cf. Hallonsten, 2022)? How do dynamics of new-washing unfold? How can they be prevented?

Connectedly, organization scholarship may need to take more responsibility in exploring and helping unleash the potential that “new organizational forms”—or here, people-positive organizing—hold for “forging a sustainable future for humanity” (Baumann et al., 2024, p. 166), for addressing “pressing organizational and societal problems” (Battilana & Beckman, 2025, p. 17; see also Adler, 2022a; Cabantous et al., 2016; Ellerman, 2009). How can contemporary organizing efforts shape and advance desirable futures for society (cf. Adler, 2022a; Battilana & Beckman, 2025; Baumann et al., 2024; Cabantous et al., 2016; Gümüşay & Reinecke, 2022)? For whom are they desirable, and in what ways? People, planet, and economic prosperity alike should be considered here. Our current capitalist society is paradigmatically dependent on acceleration and growth, leading to increased inequalities and alienation (cf. Hallonsten, 2023; Kärreman et al., 2021; Nyberg & Wright, 2022; Rosa, 2005). Are autonomy and independence really the answer?

In that regard, people-positive organizing and the emerging notion of “resonant organizing”—building on German sociologist Hartmut Rosa’s (2016) resonance theory, which has received increasing attention in organization and management studies as of late (see D’Antone et al., 2024; du Plessis & Just, 2022; Hollstein & Rosa, 2023; Vidolov et al., 2023)—seem like possible allies in the quest for contributing possible alternative answers. Much like people-positive organizing, resonant organizing is “focusing away from [new] organizational forms” (D’Antone et al., 2024, p. 21) while believing that a different “mode of being in the world” (Hollstein & Rosa, 2023, p. 715) is possible. It hones relationality and interdependence and regards vibrant (i.e., resonant) relationships to the world, to other humans, and to life in general—*not* autonomy—as the adequate response to society’s ills (Rosa, 2016). These and other possible connections between people-positive and resonant organizing warrant further scholarly exploration.

Another crucial consideration regarding the potentials of contemporary (people-positive) organizing concerns legal requirements and implications. Current legal systems widely assume and incentivize governance and ownership structures building on profit orientation and centralization of authority with CEO-leaders, making truly people-positive (e.g., community-based, democratic) organizing impotent (if not impossible) before the law (see e.g., Grandori, 2016). We need to better understand how legal systems for organization(s) can enable or restrict people-positive organizing. Given their rising popularity among practitioners, contemporary discussions on purpose-driven forms such as B-Corps or steward-owned organizations (Manelli et al., 2025; Minnaar, 2025; Sanders, 2022; see already Davis et al., 1997) warrant particular scholarly attention.

Finally, further work seems required to clarify some concepts and labels commonly used within the “new organizational forms” discourse and their (possible) connections. For instance, this thesis hinted at possible convergences between the literatures on “self-managing”, “decentralized” as well as “alternative” organizations (see also e.g., Lee, 2024). Similarities and differences between the concepts and the phenomena they (aim to) describe should be further evaluated. Likewise, the relationship between “community” and “democracy” warrants

closer examination within organizational form discussions; are they synonymous, inherently intertwined, or conceptually distinct (see e.g., Adler et al., 2023; Battilana & Beckman, 2025; Dewey, 1946; Grandori, 2016)? Interestingly, both notions of community-based (see e.g., Adler, 2001; Blagoev et al., 2019; Kanter, 1972; Kolbjørnsrud, 2018; Wheatley & Kellner-Rogers, 1998) and democratic organizing (see e.g., Battilana et al., 2018; Battilana & Beckman, 2025; Diefenbach, 2019, 2020; Freeman, 1972; Heydebrand, 1989) seem to display some obvious links to people-positive organizing which—given the variety of interpretations and manifestations of these concepts—require further study. Particularly the notion of deliberative democracy (Fishkin, 2009) and its potential for people-positive organizing seems relevant to investigate further here, given its parallels to the Follettian concept of integration and its related ambition to integrate diverse perspectives into a common path forward through open debate (cf. Battilana et al., 2018; Follett, 1919, 1941; Rosa, 2016; Wright, 2019). Popular decision-making approaches within the SMO practitioner community, such as the advice process, might be fruitfully evaluated through a lens of (deliberative) democracy (cf. Battilana & Beckman, 2025).

Overall, there is reason to be skeptical about some—perhaps even much—of the proclaimed newness in “new organizational forms”. However, there are substantial “pockets of alternativity” (Husted et al., 2025) inherent in many contemporary organizing efforts, including those studied at Zenseact as part of this thesis. Drawing dichotomous distinctions between the “new” and the “old”—between what is “truly” novel or alternative and what is not—does not seem like a helpful path for new forms scholarship to better identify and understand these pockets. As scholars, we should be reflective about the seemingly inevitable “new-washing” and mythification that many practitioners and consultants engage in and be able to look beyond the fuzz in a nuanced fashion. In that regard, the contributions offered in this thesis may offer helpful utensils for identifying and understanding degrees and intricacies of organizing differently from managerial hierarchy.

8.3. Implications for practitioners and policymakers

The insights from this thesis are not only relevant to researchers but hold implications for practitioners and policymakers as well. For practitioners, the integrative framework and heatmap offered in paper I can aid in identifying and imagining design possibilities for organizing differently. More specifically, this thesis outlines design possibilities beyond the traditional repertoire of managerial hierarchy and identifies related enabling factors of coordination that make “less-hierarchical”, “self-managing”, and “agile” organizing efforts work. It shows that a reduction in hierarchical structures and rules—as common in “new organizational forms”—does *not have to* result in chaos as everybody just roams freely. Guidance can and should be designed into *sensemaking devices*, the *Menschenbild*, as well as organizational purposes, principles, and practices—all while ensuring that these and other elements of the organization’s design “make sense” in the local, *situated* context. Overall, this thesis advocates clearly differentiating between hierarchy and managerial hierarchy: Organizing without any hierarchy—any ratable differences between people—seems like a dangerous illusion, opening the door to individual confusion and organizational dysfunction. Organizing without *managerial* hierarchy, on the other hand, may be challenging but certainly

seems possible. Awareness about such differences may help practitioners identify (and possibly avoid) discrepancies between talk and experience in contemporary organization(s).

Furthermore, this thesis articulated components of a new language for organizing differently—*Menschenbild*, people-positivity, sensemaking devices, coordination of experience, and more. To organizational practitioners—workers, organization design specialists, and formal leaders alike—these notions may offer useful points of departure for thinking and acting differently about how to organize collective effort. Of particular importance is the idea of *Menschenbild*, of the assumptions we hold about our fellow human beings. As articulated by the Corporate Rebels (cf. de Morree, 2021): If you do not seriously believe in the good in people, “less-hierarchical”, “self-managing”, and “agile” organizing may just be a waste of time and resources for you. Relatedly, this thesis cautions practitioners to be wary about the shortcuts and quick wins promised by many (consultant-driven) blueprints and ready-made frameworks. Learning from others’ journeys is of course helpful, but organizing differently only works when emerging from and resonating with the local, *situated* context. It is a fallacy to expect a plain re-labelling of “managers” to “coaches” and paying for generic training certificates to change anything substantial about how people work together. People-positive organizing requires continuous effort and engagement from everyone—but it may very well pay off in the long run.

For policymakers, a critical focus moving forward should be on setting the legislative conditions for people-positive organizing to flourish. As mentioned in section 8.2, this may particularly pertain to developing—and strengthening the status of—legal forms which prioritize people’s interests over financial interests, such as purpose-driven or steward-owned organizations. Importantly, policymakers should conceive of “organization” as the wide-reaching, diverse, and impactful social phenomenon that it is, and act as such. No organization is inevitable; all organization is subject to human design and experimentation. Organization does not only happen in large business corporations but also in public administration, social initiatives, and local communities of any shape and size.

Considering the power of organizing—how it can affect value creation at individual, organizational, and societal levels—all of us should take approaches to organizing differently from managerial hierarchy more seriously. As Graeber and Wengrow (2021, p. 8) rhetorically ask, “is not the capacity to experiment with different forms of social organization itself a quintessential part of what makes us human?”

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Appendix: NWoW movement glossary

The NWoW movement is inspired and populated by a broad variety of concepts and models, organizations and practices, as well as people and resources. This “glossary” attempts to provide an overview of the movement’s main inspirations and ideas, “defining” or characterizing them briefly.

<i>Brave New Work</i>	Book by <i>Aaron Dignan</i> , expressing views and approaches regarding the “future of work” held by the organization design consultancy he founded (The Ready). The Ready also launched a podcast (co-hosted by Dignan) under the same name, which was later rebranded to “The Future of HR” and “At Work by The Ready”.
<i>Buurtzorg</i>	Dutch homecare organization, led by founder and CEO <i>Jos de Blok</i> . Famous for its self-managing teams adopting a community-based approach to care, a relative absence of managers (14,000 employees, only two formal managers), and its emphasis on evolving purpose.
<i>Corporate Rebels</i>	Online platform and community co-founded by <i>Joost Minnaar</i> and <i>Pim de Morree</i> , who want to “make work more fun”. Accompanied by a book with the same name and other offerings such as a “masterclass” on “progressive organizational design” or “rebel cells” connecting members “with other progressive organizations who are replacing bureaucracy with better systems”. With more than 45,000 newsletter subscribers and almost 200,000 followers on LinkedIn, Corporate Rebels may be the most popular voice within the NWoW movement currently.
<i>DAO</i>	Acronym for “decentralized autonomous organization”, an organization in which key activities (such as decision-making and information sharing) are managed, or at least facilitated, by distributed ledger technology (blockchain). To enthusiasts, DAOs with their smart contracts provide a flexible, transparent, and democratic infrastructure for organizing collective effort.
<i>FAVI</i>	Medium-sized French company manufacturing gearbox forks. Particularly known for its successful development under <i>Jean-François Zobrist</i> ’s CEO tenure (1983 to 2009), who rebuilt the organization based on the assumption that “people are good”, trusting rather controlling them in their work. Since Zobrist left, FAVI has gradually returned to traditional logics of hierarchical control.
<i>Haier</i>	Chinese appliances manufacturer with more than 100,000 employees. Famous for its <i>Rendanheyi</i> model, introduced by founder-CEO <i>Zhang Ruimin</i> and strongly influenced by the

guidance of management guru *Gary Hamel*. Haier's Rendanheyi model builds strongly on the idea of entrepreneurial employees forming self-managing micro-enterprises which compete on internal markets.

Holacracy

Organizational model developed by *Brian Robertson* based on his experience founding a software firm. Strongly building on ideas of sociocracy and self-organization, Holacracy adopts a nested circle structure and is focused on clear individual roles and procedural rules within a transparent governance system. Originally popularized along the *Zappos* case, Holacracy continues to be marketed as a framework by *HolacracyOne*.

Leadermorphosis

Podcast hosted by *Lisa Gill*, a coach, trainer, and writer on SMOs. Gill is part of *Tuff Leadership Training*, through which she has co-authored a book on SMOs and collaborates with other actors within the NWoW movement such as *Corporate Rebels*.

Liberated company

Concept developed by French business professor *Isaac Getz*, also referred to as “freedom-based company”, which is widely popular in French-speaking countries. Refers to organizations which promote the freedom and responsibility of employees. Strong convergence in intellectual influences and cases with the *Teal* concept. What *Teal* is for most of the NWoW movement, the “liberated company” concept is for the French-speaking community.

Mondragón

Short for Mondragón Corporación Cooperativa, a Basque cooperative consisting of more than 90 companies and more than 80,000 employees. Famous for its worker ownership, democratic co-determination, and solidarity mechanisms across companies. Popular case especially in discussion about alternative organizational forms but also within NWoW movement.

Morning Star

US-based manufacturing firm with more than 500 employees, processing tomato products. Famous for its self-management approach and absence of bosses in a low-skilled labor environment. Particularly praised for their “Colleague Letters of Understanding” (CLOUs) which establish bilateral agreements between colleagues, clarifying responsibilities and expectations in an explicit, transparent, and morally binding form.

New ways of working

Umbrella term frequently used to refer to the work practices inspiring the new ways of working (NWoW) movement as pioneered by *self-managing organizations*. Also commonly referred to as “future of work” or “new work”.

<i>Oticon</i>	Danish hearing aid manufacturer with more than 3,000 employees. Famous for its “spaghetti organization” introduced under then-CEO <i>Lars Kolind</i> (1988 to 1998). Widely applauded for its business success after reducing managerial hierarchy to a two-layered structure. Since 1996, Oticon’s newly developed, IT-based project organization (the “spaghetti organization”) was increasingly turned into a traditional matrix organization, with a gradual reintroduction of hierarchical layers.
<i>SAFe</i>	Acronym for “Scaled Agile Framework”, a model developed and sold by <i>Scaled Agile Inc.</i> which promises to increase the “business agility” of organizations. Building on a mix of ideas including Agile, Lean, and DevOps, SAFe is accompanied by a broad range of training programs and certifications.
<i>Self-managing organizations</i>	Umbrella term frequently used to refer to organizations pioneering the NWoW movement. Similar terms include, for instance, “progressive organizations”, “self-managed organizations”, or “flat organizations”.
<i>Semco</i>	Brazilian mixer and agitator manufacturing company. Most known for the company’s turnaround under successor-CEO <i>Ricardo Semler</i> since the 1980s, who transformed a firm of 90 employees into a multi-business conglomerate with more than 3,000 employees in 21 years. Based on this story, Semler became a famous author and speaker, promoting his alternative “management approach” through his <i>Semco Style Institute</i> and their training and consulting offerings.
<i>Spotify</i>	Swedish audio streaming platform with more than 7,000 employees. Famous for its <i>Spotify model</i> , an organizational framework for scaling agile practices meant to bring the success of Spotify to other (software) companies. The Spotify Model works to achieve “both autonomy and alignment” based on a structure of feature-focused, self-organizing teams (“squads”). Squads working on a common mission are grouped into “tribes”. Individuals with similar skills within a tribe are grouped into “chapters” and are encouraged to share knowledge across tribes in communities of practice (“guilds”).
<i>Teal</i>	Concept developed by <i>Frédéric Laloux</i> , a former McKinsey partner turned leadership consultant, coach, and social entrepreneur. Teal (as in, the deep blue-green color) refers to organizations which are rooted in “the next stage of human consciousness” and operate based on key principles of self-management, wholeness, and evolutionary purpose. In his best-selling book on Teal organizations, Laloux draws on many popular cases, including

Buurtzorg, FAVI, HolacracyOne, Morning Star, and W.L. Gore. Laloux's ideas on Teal organizations are considered foundational within the NWoW movement.

Valve

US-based video game company with more than 300 employees, particularly known for its Steam gaming platform. Famous within NWoW movement for employees deciding which projects they want to work on (self-selection), consensus-based decision-making, and its handbook welcoming employees to "Flatland".

W.L. Gore

US-based material science firm with more than 12,000 employees, famous for its Gore-Tex fabric. Most known within NWoW movement for its "lattice" organizational structure, with little to no formal bosses but all employees being "associates", and its *waterline metaphor*. This metaphor prompts employees to ask others for advice before taking a decision that could "sink the boat" yet encourages them to take other decisions by themselves.

Zappos

US-based online shoe retailer with more than 1,500 employees, acquired by Amazon in 2009. Particularly known for its adoption of *Holacracy* under then-CEO Tony Hsieh, though the company has long moved away from *Holacracy*. Since then, Zappos experimented with multiple other organizational models and practices, many of them inspired by *Haier* and aimed at instilling "market-based dynamics".