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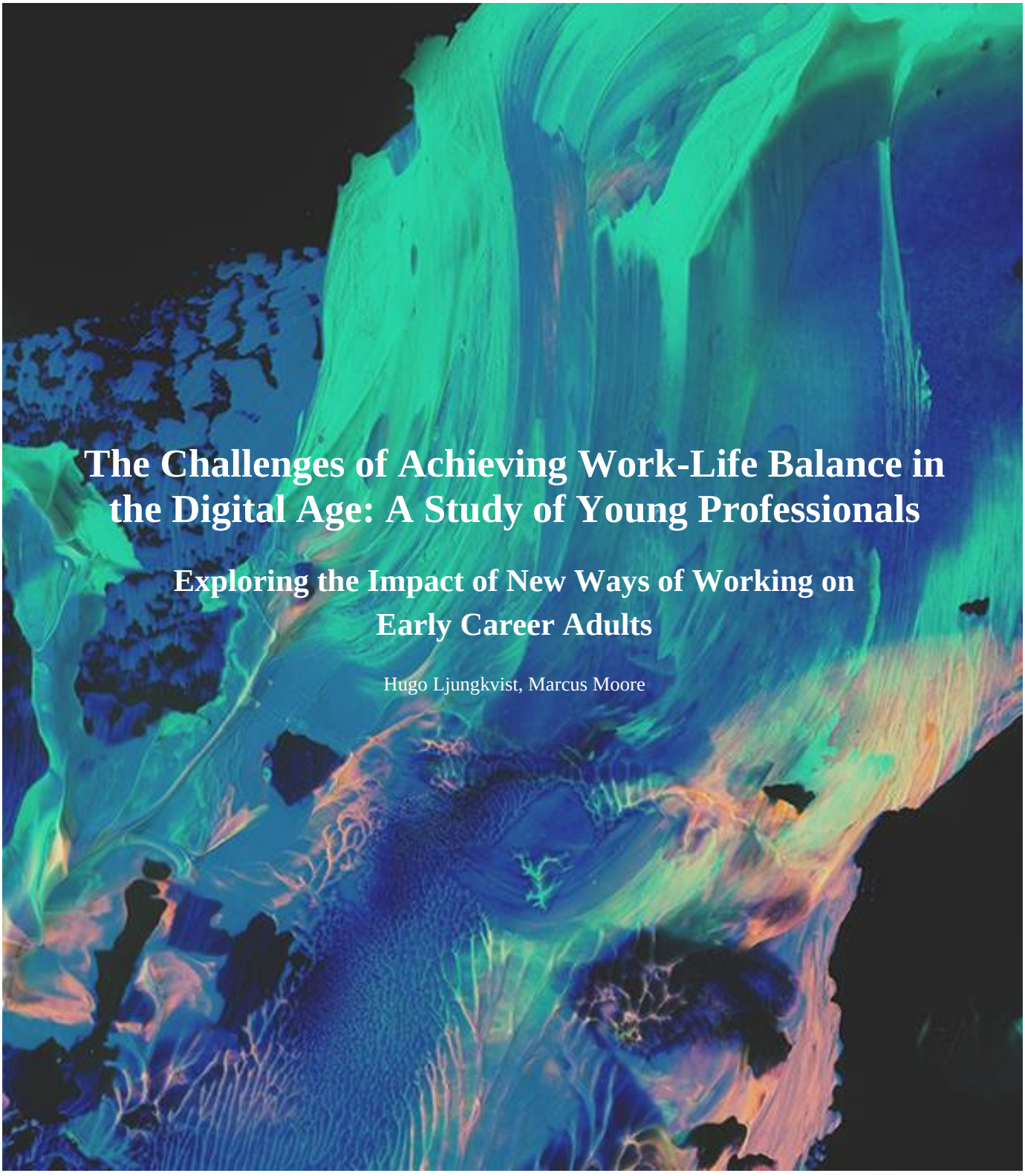

The Challenges of Achieving Work-Life Balance in the Digital Age: A Study of Young Professionals

Exploring the Impact of New Ways of Working on Early Career Adults

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Abstract

Technological advancements have paved the way for flexible working arrangements across offices globally. This has fundamentally changed the notion of how work should be conducted, causing new opportunities and challenges to arise. Traditional boundaries and status quo are being challenged by the demands of future generations entering the workforce, situating young professionals in previously unexplored situations. The physical boundaries that used to separate work from personal space are now being blurred as a result of the increased technological connectedness. This paired with the lack of organisational understanding of how flexible work arrangements influence employees' ability to achieve work-life, balance puts young professionals at an elevated risk of experiencing setbacks. Existing research into work-life balance has mainly been situated regarding the concerns of conventional families, where marriage and parenting commonly are the focus. Young professionals are inherently different to previous generations, causing them to face completely unique challenges that this research project aims at exploring.

This research adopted a qualitative data collection method through a purposive sampling technique. Eight semi-structured interviews were conducted with Swedish young professionals in various industries obtaining white-collar jobs. The data sets were analysed using grounded theory to generate aggregated dimensions leading to the results and subsequent conclusions of this research project.

The key findings of this study highlight several challenges that affect young professionals' ability to achieve a functioning work-life balance. Flexible work arrangements strongly influence both physical and mental aspects of employee well-being through the lack of stimulating social interactions. Moreover, external, and internal pressure causes traditional boundaries between personal and professional life to blur, thus complicating their ability to achieve work-life balance. Lastly, the results highlight young professionals' lack of professional experience as an influential variable both in terms of what they value and in their (in)ability to harmonise the different spheres of personal and professional life.

The findings contribute to the current discussion about work-life balance by situating the research in a Swedish context of young professionals. They largely confirm and expand upon connections between flexible work arrangements and work-life balance challenges associated with them. Organisations, individuals, and legislators all benefit from our findings emphasising the wants and needs of future generations entering the labour market longing for work-life balance.

Keywords: *Work-life balance, New Ways of Working, Young Professionals*

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The amount of late evenings and weekends spent on finalising this paper is almost ironic given the topic of our thesis. We are, however, immensely proud of the outcome and want to thank each other for complementing one another throughout the research process.

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1. Introduction

The introductory chapter presents the background to the subject and touches upon relevant literature. Next, follows a problem formulation describing the research gap aimed at justifying the research question. In the purpose section of the study, the authors aim to put the research into a relevant context by addressing what we want to accomplish with this study. Finally, the chapter ends with a presentation of the delimitations of the study.

1.1 Background

Live to work, or work to live? The question of whether it is possible to achieve a fulfilling life while working hard and accomplishing professional goals is something gaining increased interest among researchers and practitioners (Sturges & Guest, 2004, p. 5). However, the question is of greater importance today than ever before due to the rapid advancements in technology combined with the new demands of future generations. A new young generation of workers is now entering the workforce, challenging the existing power bases and established management controls. Their identities are deeply rooted in technology, and they are unfamiliar with the analogue world, causing them to expect seamless communication with their colleagues, without the constraints of time and place (Singh & Dangmei, 2016, p. 2). Moreover, they reject traditional boundaries between work and life, deeming them outdated. They also question the culture of presenteeism and instead value work autonomy and flexibility. (Thomson, 2015) The interplay of technology and work combined with the misalignment of different generations' attitudes towards it, challenges the very foundation of work-life balance.

The concept of work-life balance stems from the theory of an individual's ability to balance their different spheres in life, mainly referred to as work and non-work (Clark, 2000). Work being exclusively referred to activities related to an individual's professional job and career, while non-work is related to all other activities outside of the job. These activities can for example include social life, family, or sports. Clark (2000, p. 751) defines work-life balance as the *"... satisfaction and good functioning at home and at work, with a minimum of role conflict."* with role conflict being the seamless movement between the work and non-work sphere (Kaiser et al., 2011, p. 3).

Historically, the term work-life has been viewed as two separate spheres that people move between, keeping work and life separated (Clark, 2000, p. 750). Dating back to the industrial revolution, work and non-work activities have generally been carried out in separate places with different people present, without the acknowledgement of either of them being able to impact the other significantly (Clark, 2000, p. 748). By the late 1970s, the traditional interpretation of work-life started to be challenged with new perspectives on its interrelation. A study made by Staines (1980) investigated the relationship between work and non-work activities and showed strong evidence that experiences, feelings, and actions which happen in either the work or non-work sphere, are likely to affect the other, also known as the "Spillover effect" or "Spillover theory" (Clark, 2000, p. 749). To contextualise, an employee that is experiencing a bad day is likely to be bringing those same emotions back home, still being in a bad mood. More recently, Bhuvaneswari et al. (2022) found that the boundaries between work and personal life indeed are hard to define because of the increased use of technical solutions. Workers find themselves constantly online on their work computers or mobile devices which makes it difficult to find a work-life balance. Bhuvaneswari et al. (2022, p. 3068) also found that this problem drastically increased during the COVID-19 pandemic as remote work, primarily from the employees' own homes,

became a new standard. These findings show that the concept and previous interpretation of work-life balance indeed have changed, implying that we no longer can separate the two spheres but that they are interconnected.

Digitalization has changed how individuals today work and interact with each other in multiple ways. The evolution of social media and communication apps has made it easier than ever before to stay connected and interact with family, friends, and co-workers regardless of the physical distance. Habits of how we consume and share information have also changed drastically with the continuous development of the internet, making information more accessible at only an arm's length away (Paliszkiewicz & Skarzynska, 2022, pp. 122-123). Industries are faced with keeping up with new technological developments in a fast-changing environment to better facilitate the needs of both consumers and employees (Wong et al., 2018). Generation Z are among the first generations that can be described as digital natives, meaning that they have been a part of the trend of digitalization since the beginning of their lives and thus witnessed its evolution first-hand (Singh & Dangmei, 2016, p. 2). Although they reap the benefits of digitalization, they are also exposed to significant risks because of it. Information overload and online addiction are two of the most prevalent risks associated with digitization and Generation Z (Paliszkiewicz & Skarzynska, 2022, p. 124). Information overload relates to the issue of being overwhelmed by too much information, making it difficult to process the information and later interpret it (Agnew & Szykman, 2005, p. 58). Online or internet addiction stems from individuals, significantly Generation Z, struggling to balance their online and offline presence because they are so interconnected with social media and the internet in general (Young, 2004, p. 405).

Yet another reason for the increased attention to work-life balance is the new generation of employees entering the job market, also referred to as young professionals (Brome, 2009). Despite the lack of a commonly agreed-upon definition of young professionals, they are frequently referred to as early-career adults who work in occupations classified as white-collar and fall within a particular age range (Brome, 2009, p. 1; Tshishonga, 2022, pp. 99-100). We define young professionals as people born after 1995, corresponding to a maximum age of 28 years, as of writing. They are the newest generation of professionals entering the job market and all belong to Generation Z which is the first generation to grow up in a fully technological world as we have it today (Singh & Dangmei, 2016, p. 2). While Millennials were gradually introduced to technological advancements, Generation Z is from a young age integrated with social networks, the internet in general and advanced personal devices. Robak (2022, p. 472) argues that Generation Z is affiliated with a high degree of computerization and strong abilities in performing several tasks simultaneously while having a generally positive attitude towards their professional future. Further characteristics that distinguish Generation Z are their longing for sustainable development and how they value the social environment while working (Robak, 2022, p. 472). Iorgulescu (2018, p. 49) argues that companies which ensure personal development for their Generation Z employees are more likely to retain them as loyal employees, with advancement opportunities being one of the most crucial factors for Generation Z members in their search for work.

1.2 Problem formulation

Despite the existence of a considerable amount of research on work-life balance (Alegre & Pasamar, 2017; Austen, 2022; Bhuvaneswari et al., 2022; Chandra, 2012; Clark, 2000; Duxbury & Smart, 2010; Frame & Hartog, 2003; Galinsky & Johnson, 1998; Hogarth & Bosworth, 2009; Houston, 2005; Kaiser et al., 2011; Khateeb, 2021; Lewis et al., 2007;

Mills, 2020; Pasamar, 2015; Yasbek, 2004), there is still a need to conduct more on young professionals, especially related to technology and flexible working arrangements. Large bodies of existing work-life balance research have been situated on the concerns for conventional families, where marriage and parenting commonly are the focus (Schultz et al., 2012, p. 45). Young professionals are inherently different to other generations, causing them to face completely unique challenges (Schroth, 2019, p. 5). They are early career adults who grew up in a digitised world, meaning that their life and work composition, as well as their behaviour, is different compared to what the majority of the existing body of literature focuses on.

Young professionals today are the most goal-oriented generation to date and value, unlike millennials, personal achievements, and monetary rewards higher than family and balance (European Labour Authority, 2023). While this does not appear to be problematic by itself, it does when combined with the issue of work-life balance. Kirchmayer and Fratričová (2018, p. 6027) claim that individuals belonging to Gen Z do not prioritise work-life balance as a particularly important factor when choosing future employment since they lack work experience, something they argue is an influential factor in an individual's motivational profile of choosing employment. Other studies found that Gen Z enters adulthood with significantly less work experience than previous generations, largely attributed to the environment they have grown up in being characterised by more affluent households, increased competition in higher education, and the pandemic reducing the available employment opportunities (Fry & Parker, 2018; Institute of Student Employers, 2021). The lack of previous experience puts this group at an increasingly high risk of experiencing difficulties in keeping work and life separated. Other generations grew up and began their careers in a time when society and working life functioned differently and may therefore obtain a more natural way of differentiating between work and other parts of life due to their experience.

Another characteristic unique to young professionals today is the importance technology plays in their life in terms of both reliance and intensity (Singh & Dangmei, 2016, p. 2). For instance, statistics show that the amount of time spent in front of a screen differs significantly between different generational groups (SlickText, 2023; Viens, 2019; Walker, 2022). While Millennials, on average, spend 8.5 hours per day on their digital devices, Gen Z spends a staggering 10.6 hours (Walker, 2022). Another survey identifies a trend where future generations use technological devices more than their predecessors (SlickText, 2023), implying the importance of mapping out the challenges of work-life balance when future working generations will be increasingly connected. Other research conducted by Faverio (2022) finds that nearly half (48%) of young adults aged 18 to 29 reported being online "almost constantly". In comparison, only 22% of those aged 50 to 64 and 8% of those aged 65 and older reported the same level of constant online engagement. These numbers alone may not appear problematic at first sight. However, if combined with the findings of Smith and Anderson (2018), which finds that young adults the ages 18-29 are more likely to report that technology makes it difficult to disconnect from work outside of working hours compared to adults over the age of 30, the problem begins to appear. Young people's reliance on technology may therefore pose challenges not experienced similarly by other groups of society before, which is why it is important to map them out.

Not only are their characteristics different from other generations, but it is widely acknowledged that the last decades have seen significant changes in the way we work, largely attributed to advancements in information and communication technology (Chung & van der Lippe, 2020, pp. 365-366; Hoonakker & Korunka, 2014, p. 1). Today, email is the most prevalent way of computer-mediated communication within organisations,

something that has gained a new dimension with the rise of mobile technologies (Derks & Backer, 2010). A study conducted by Harris Interactive (cited in Heussner, 2010) finds that employees can keep up with up to 50 emails a day before they get overwhelmed. This quickly becomes problematic when the average daily number of corporate emails sent and received amounts to 121, not including spam (Campaign Monitor, 2023). The incorporation of technologies within organisations has caused a shift in the design of how companies structure their work. At the heart of this new approach lies the expectations of employees to organise their work flexibly by deciding for themselves when they work, where they work, and how they work (Chung & van der Lippe, 2020, pp. 365-366; Demerouti et al., 2014, p. 123). This essentially means control has shifted to employees rather than employers, implying that the sentiment of work has changed in the sense that output is increasingly higher valued than being present on-site during working hours. The shift has been coined by scholars as *New Ways of Working (NWW)* and can be seen as an umbrella term for the changes in the way organisations structure their work along with technological advancements (Demerouti et al., 2014; Van Steenbergen et al., 2017). Despite there being a clear consensus on the organisational benefits of implementing the new ways of working in terms of more efficient processes and reduction of organisational costs, its impact on work-life balance is yet to be thoroughly explored (Blok et al., 2011, p. 4; Demerouti et al., 2014, pp. 123-124). In fact, Blok et al. (2011, p. 4) emphasise the fact that most employers lack a comprehensive understanding of the long-term consequences of these adjustments. The employer's limited comprehension of the consequences of their own initiatives could potentially expose workers to unforeseen risks.

The current literature that does exist suggests that there are some challenges to striking a balance between work and personal life in the era of technology-driven connectedness. One of the most crucial challenges to work-life balance is keeping them as strictly separated as possible (Mills, 2020) since they have a tendency to blend together rather than remain as distinct domains (Austen, 2022, p. 10; Nam, 2013, p. 1017). While many workers today value location-independent work arrangements and over 50% of the Swedish labour force conducts, at least in part, their work remotely, it does come with challenges. According to a study conducted by ISS Facility Services, a majority of young professionals in Sweden felt understimulated by remote work (Nenasheva, 2023). Additionally, the study found that one out of every five individuals experiences feelings of depression as a result of remote work (Nenasheva, 2023). Another study by Bertoni et al. (2022, p. 14) found resonating answers suggesting that remote work during the Covid pandemic had a detrimental effect on depression and the overall mental health of workers, suggesting that remote work may be a public health concern. Other research by (Elbogen et al., 2022) concludes that working remotely, especially with the use of digital meetings, increases feelings of anxiousness, social isolation, and emotional exhaustion due to the lack of physical social interactions.

New ways of working also incorporate flexible working hours, where a study by (Shagvaliyeva & Yazdanifard, 2014) show that moderately flexible working hours may facilitate work-life balance by reducing stress levels and therefore facilitate a better balance between work commitments and personal commitments in the complex life puzzle. Contrarily, people with more extreme flexibility in their work schedules during non-traditional working hours instead encountered more mental health problems and struggled increasingly with their quality of sleep compared to a control group of people with non-flexible working hours (Martens et al., 1999, p. 44). While these findings are worrying, the increased demand for 24/7 availability, information overload, lack of routine, and flexible work arrangements are just some of the potential difficulties individuals in today’s work climate may experience. However, the new ways of working likely pose even greater or even unknown challenges when they are combined with the unique characteristics of the

younger generations, which is why this study aims to map out what the challenges are for young professionals.

Moreover, previous research investigating flexible work arrangements and technology's impact on work-life balance has mostly been conducted in the context of the US. There is no denying the fact that work culture looks different around the world, even within the developed West itself. Differences such as working hours and work climate vary greatly. For instance, a survey conducted by The U.S. Bureau of Labour Statistics (2021, p. 13) estimated that Americans work an average of 8.18 hours a day, corresponding to 40.9 hours a week. On the contrary, European countries generally work significantly less with the European Union averaging only 36.4 hours weekly (Eurostat, 2021). The Swedish legislation even enforces that regular working hours may not exceed 40 hours each week, and including overtime, it may not exceed 48 hours weekly (Swedish Working Environment Authority, 2022). The reasons why Americans tend to work several hours more a week may be many, however, an article by the European Business Review (2021) argues that it could be partly attributed to the American working culture and specifically the prevalence of a 'hustler mentality'. As mentioned previously, work culture varies greatly between countries, meaning that the difficulties of maintaining a work-life balance will also vary depending on the study's locality. This further supports the need for this research project since the literature on technology's impact on work-life balance is scarce in Sweden, especially concerning young professionals.

To concretize the existing research gap, young professionals have a unique reliance on technology not seen before in the labour market. While technological connectedness is an integral part of young professionals' lives, both personally and professionally, it has not thoroughly been studied in the context of work-life balance. The adoption of technology in the workplace has allowed new ways of working to emerge and become the new reality of how work is conducted, further emphasising the importance of investigating what challenges it poses to young professionals. Previous studies suggest that modern work arrangements are a double-edged sword since it comes with both opportunities and challenges. Moreover, previous literature has been situated mostly in the US and not aimed at the young population of Gen Z. Instead, the focus has primarily been on conventional nuclear family set-ups, which is why we as researchers of this study believe more research is needed in order to adhere to their and future generations' needs.

1.3 Research question

Based on the problem formulation and identified research gap, the following research question has been formulated:

- *What are the challenges for young professionals in achieving work-life balance?*

1.4 Purpose of the study

This study aspires to investigate what the main challenges for young professionals are in achieving a balance between their personal and professional lives. Despite work-life balance, in general, being a fairly researched topic, large portions of the currently available literature fail to touch upon the influence digital technologies and flexible working arrangements have had on the way we work and spend our free time. The employer's limited understanding of their own work initiatives' consequences further necessitates the need for this type of study. Young professionals possess different characteristics and have an

inherently different relationship towards technology than other groups in the labour market that has previously not been thoroughly explored. The scarce literature that does exist has been conducted almost exclusively abroad and quickly becomes obsolete when technological advancements are happening at an almost exponential rate. Therefore, this study is of great relevance for both employers and employees in the sense that it addresses a segment and context that has not previously been thoroughly studied. The authors of this text presume that the results have the possibility to contribute to the currently existing literature while simultaneously raising awareness of the complexity of maintaining a work-life balance for young professionals in a highly digitised society.

1.5 Delimitations

The research project adopts an employee perspective and will therefore solely regard the perceived challenges from employees, not employers. The study will not conclude the benefits of the new ways of working but will instead try and highlight the difficulties arising in this new reality. Additionally, the locality of the study is Sweden, where we can consider the country's unique social, cultural, and economic factors.

This study will be looking specifically at the challenges that young professionals between the ages of 22-28 face when trying to balance their work and personal lives. The age bracket was defined based on the limited scope of the study combined with the most crucial segment of the research gap, namely white-collar workers of Gen Z. Furthermore, the research will include solely full-time workers not restricted to any specific industries as the study aims to get a broad understanding of the difficulties that young professionals across different fields are dealing with. However, it will solely include respondents obtaining white-collar jobs since we believe that the technological advancements in recent years have impacted white-collar workers' work-life balance to a larger extent than blue-collar workers, making the group increasingly relevant for the study.

Nevertheless, a larger study would potentially be able to incorporate different age groups, geographical contexts, and employment types to try and cross-examine the results and gain a more nuanced overview of the complexity of maintaining a work-life balance in a digitised world. However, the current scope of the study makes this unfeasible, which is why necessary delimitations have been made.

2. Scientific Methodology

The methodology chapter provides a detailed account of our existing knowledge, selection of subjects, and theoretical assumptions. The chapter concludes by outlining our theoretical approach and the process the project undertakes for conducting a literature review. Additionally, it explains the methodology that was used to collect and analyse data, as well as any limitations and ethical considerations taken into account.

2.1 Pre-existing knowledge & choice of subject

This research project carries a weight of 15 credits and serves as the final project of our Master's degree at Umeå School of Business, Economics, and Statistics. While we have had very similar academic backgrounds at the undergraduate level, our educational paths split at a later stage during our graduate studies. Hugo has a specialisation towards Finance/Management with simultaneous working experience in retail. His mix of theoretical and practical expertise has given him valuable insights into the challenges and dynamics of juggling work and personal life in a digitised society. Marcus on the other hand has focused on Business Development & Internationalisation. Through two exchange periods, he has been fortunate to explore different work cultures and interpretations of the concept of work-life balance in different international contexts, resulting in a unique perspective on the subject. Our diverse backgrounds and knowledge profiles have resulted in a solid foundation of knowledge to utilise in our research project. We have a thorough awareness of many areas related to work-life balance and its consequences in the digital age thanks to our combined knowledge and experiences.

As our Master's program comes to a close and we get ready to start our professional careers, we have found ourselves contemplating the challenges that lie ahead in achieving work-life balance in the digital age. Being part of Generation Z has forced the two of us to grow up immersed in technology and witness its incorporation throughout all facets of our lives. Our personal experience combined with the way we have witnessed our generational peers consume technology made us realise that our generation has a different relationship towards technology and work than others. This sparked our curiosity and deepened our interest in exploring this as a viable research topic.

Nevertheless, Bryman and Bell (2015) claim that values are a reflection of the beliefs and personal opinions of the individual, which potentially could impact the study. While we do want to be objective to ensure the reliability of the study, we are humble and transparent about the possibility that our pre-existing knowledge and values may have influenced certain aspects of the report such as the choice of subject. Another way our pre-understandings may have influenced the research is during the interviews. Since our study collects information through semi-structured interviews, both the interview questions and the execution of the interview are due to subjective influences where judgements may be necessary in terms of interview style and follow-up questions. While personal biases are commonly seen as a limitation, Alvesson and Sandberg (2021, p. 408) argue that they can actually bring significant value to the study by supplementing the scientific theory. Therefore, we do not necessarily see our possible influences as strictly negative, instead, we embrace them to the advantage of the study.

Overall, our drive to research the challenges young professionals experience in maintaining a work-life balance stems from personal reflections, the prevalence of technology in our lives, and the shared struggles of our peers. While potential personal biases are prevalent due to our pre-understandings, we deem them to actually be of significant value to the study.

In general, we also believe that our findings will contribute to the existing body of knowledge by providing valuable insights for organisations and policymakers, but most importantly the individuals belonging to Gen Z entering the labour market within a short time.

2.2 Theoretical method

2.2.1 Ontology

Ontology is the philosophical assumption relating to the nature of reality, which can differ greatly whether adopting a subjectivist or objectivist approach (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p. 47). Subjectivism supports the claim that there is more than one reality, created by social constructs and the subjective interpretations of individuals (Saunders et al., 2012, p. 132). Researchers who adopt a subjective approach seek to understand these interpretations and their interplay. Since we will be interacting with our respondents through interviews in an attempt to answer our research question of the challenges of achieving a work-life balance for young professionals, we deemed subjectivism to be the most appropriate approach for our thesis. The fact that our thesis falls under social science further strengthens the argument for using a subjective approach.

Objectivism, on the other hand, believes that there is only one reality that is objective and exists independent of human perception (Saunders et al., 2012, p. 131). Researchers who adopt an objectivist approach assume that there are underlying mechanisms and causal relationships that can be measured and identified through research. Because of this, objectivism is commonly used within natural science when knowledge and information are more definite and can be quantified (Saunders et al., 2019, p. 133). Adopting an objective approach to our study would not have been appropriate since it is not within natural science, nor would it allow us to gain a deeper understanding of our respondents' own experiences and their view of reality. As a result of that, objectivism is commonly associated with quantitative research, while subjectivism often relates to qualitative data (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p. 45).

2.2.2 Epistemology

Epistemological assumptions relate to what the researchers view as acceptable or valid knowledge, likewise the relationship between the researchers and their subject, differentiating between interpretivism and positivism (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p. 47; Saunders et al., 2012, p. 140). Under an interpretivist approach, acceptable knowledge comes from individual views of reality, which can be complex as well as contextualised differently (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 116). Researchers that adopt an interpretivist approach also seek to limit the distance between themselves and the subject, which in turn allows for greater subjective interpretations (Bryman & Bell, 2015, p. 28). It demands that the researchers be part of the study and allow for the interpretation of the respondents' experiences (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020, pp. 41-42). We deem the interpretivist approach to be the most appropriate for our study, as we will interview respondents and ask about their personal experiences and feelings. Because of this, we acknowledge our respondents' individual experiences and realities as highly valid knowledge.

Positivism claims that valid knowledge should come from objective observations of a phenomenon through surveys, for example, where facts can be measured and later laid as the groundwork for generalisations (Saunders et al., 2012, p. 140). Under the positivist approach, researchers strive to distance themselves from their subjects and keep a high

degree of objectivity to avoid unwanted biases (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p. 47). According to interpretivists, social interactions and social constructs should be analysed in in-depth ways that can capture deeper understandings, thus not making them quantifiable (Bell et al., 2019, p. 31). One of the most common criticisms of interpretivism is that the subjective values and biases of the researchers can affect how the research is implemented and, ultimately, the results of the study (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p. 48).

2.2.3 Paradigm

A research paradigm can be referred to as the philosophical framework that guides the research process, explaining how certain choices are connected to each other and what they mean for the research (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p. 43; Saunders et al., 2012, p. 141). As previously mentioned in the ontology, research can adopt either a subjectivist or objectivist approach that also entails respective paradigms. These paradigms are set on a continuum, where interpretivism and positivism are the extreme points on either end of the continuum. Researchers can be fluent along this continuum, but depending on the nature of the research, one end tends to be preferred over the other (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p. 45). Interpretivism emphasises that reality is a subjective social construct based on the beliefs, experiences, and perceptions of the individuals existing within it; thus, it is closely related to social science. Based on this, and our theoretical choices explained previously, this thesis will follow an interpretivist approach as it is determined to be the most appropriate with regards to the purpose of the study as well as answering our research question.

Research under the positivist paradigm, which falls under objectivism, generally prefers to collect hard data that can be quantified and later used to create strong generalisations, usually pertaining to natural science (Saunders et al., 2012, p. 134). Another key indicator for positivist research is that the researchers try to distance themselves from what is being researched, thus operating in a way that is free from any personal values of the researchers that could affect the study. The interpretivist approach adopts the opposite, demanding that the researchers be involved with their subject of research.

2.2.4 Axiology

With its origins in ancient Greek, axiology tackles questions related to what can be valued as good or desirable and how that affects the outcome of the research at hand (Biedenbach & Jacobsson, 2016, p. 140). Because of these values and how they are linked to the researchers, the acceptance of research findings can vary. Under a positivist research approach, researchers may distance themselves from subjectivity and biases because they believe that the research process itself is free and independent from biased values since they are observing one true reality (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p. 47). On the contrary, Saunders et al. (2012) argue that research that adopts an interpretivist approach is bound to values and subjectivity, where the researcher is closely involved in what is being researched. These values later help to interpret and identify what can be seen as facts from the study (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p. 48).

As previously mentioned, we have adopted an interpretivist approach to our study. Therefore, we acknowledge the fact that the research process will be affected by us as researchers and our involvement in the study. We also recognise that pre-existing experiences, values, and beliefs can influence our interviews and how we later interpret the information from these interviews. While subjectivity can be viewed as a potential risk, we identify it as one of the greatest advantages of adopting an interpretivist approach. In order to answer our research question of what work-life balance challenges young professionals are faced with, we need to involve the subjective opinions of our respondents, as this allows

us to gain a deeper understanding. This would not have been possible under a positivist approach, where objectivity should be upheld by researchers.

2.3 Theoretical approach

There are generally two different theoretical approaches in scientific research, inductive and deductive, which explain the connection between theory and empirical findings (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p. 7). Although the two approaches are different, it is not uncommon to see components of induction in deductive research and vice versa, as they often influence each other (Bryman & Bell, 2015, p. 25). We do not reject the possibility of having them both influence our thesis; however, we will mainly adopt an inductive theoretical approach for the research design. Inductive research is commonly used to provide interpretations and further understandings of social phenomena and has been proven to be appropriate for an interpretivist research design (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p. 59). In addition, inductive research aims to identify general patterns based on individual observations (Fejes & Thornberg, 2012, p. 23), meaning that it moves from the specific to the more general in an attempt to draw valid conclusions about a social phenomenon (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p. 7). Because of this, the inductive research approach is commonly used by researchers who adopt a qualitative data collection method. The deductive approach, on the other hand, is related to forming hypotheses and testing them against existing theories (Fejes & Thornberg, 2012, p. 24). Adopting this approach allows researchers to test theories in order to observe their degree of validity with strong empirical support. As a consequence of this, the deductive approach is commonly used in quantitative research, which undertakes an objectivist ontological assumption (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p. 47).

This research will be grounded in theories that have been in existence for a long time, primarily theories relevant to work-life balance and new ways of working in connection to young professionals. Therefore, as our research will take a standpoint from these theories, we do not aim to prove the reliability of existing theories but rather identify and expand on the research gap. From the research gap, our ambition is to present theoretical contributions by combining our findings with the existing theories on the subject.

2.4 Literature review

Literature search and literature review play a pivotal role in any research project and can be regarded as the foundation of the researchers' choices while justifying their research design and research question (Hart, 2012, p. 2; Bryman & Bell, 2015, p. 100). According to Collis and Hussey (2014, p. 76), a literature review should be treated as a systematic process that identifies existing knowledge and theories about a particular subject relevant to the research. Conducting a thorough literature review decreases the risk of repeating or duplicating research that has already been presented, allowing the researchers to establish their own theoretical contributions (Hart, 2012, p. 3). Likewise, a literature review which is not extensive enough is likely to show a lack of understanding on behalf of the researchers and ultimately a lower degree of depth in the research itself.

Concerning the localisation of reliable scientific articles for this research, we opted to predominantly use Google Scholar, Business Source Ultimate, and Academic Search Premier, all of which were made available by Umeå University. The search was initially conducted through keyword searches (see Appendix 1) relevant to the topic, such as *Work-life balance*, *New Ways of Working*, and *Young Professionals* to gain an idea of the amount of currently available research, while simultaneously building a comprehensive understanding of the subject. After the initial searches had been conducted, we were able to

further specialise the searches and find additional relevant literature for the research project. Examples of these keyword searches are *Work-life balance and technology, Young professionals and Work-life balance,* and *Generation Z characteristics*. The vast amount of information found through these search methods prompted us to make judgement calls since it is not possible to include all of it, something that Bryman and Bell (2015, p. 100) argue is common while reviewing large volumes of information. Sources were then chosen based on their relevance as well as by using cross-reference techniques to ensure their credibility.

For instance, after reviewing the literature on Gen Z, we concluded that a significant amount of it was both unreliable and outdated. We obtained this view since the Gen Z generation is still young, and many studies from 2015 and earlier that seek to explain their characteristics in the workplace had us question their trustworthiness. It is important to remember that the entire cohort was composed of teenagers or even younger people before 2015, most of whom still attended school. As mentioned earlier, both of us are also part of Gen Z, causing our pre-understandings of the topic to further support our scepticism towards research conducted before 2015. Due to these facts, we deemed large parts of the literature on Gen Z questionable and instead opted for the usage of more recent studies to ensure that both the context and characteristics of Gen Z were up to date.

Almost all sources cited in this research project have been peer-reviewed scientific articles, which indicates that they are of high quality. There is, however, a prevalence of non-peer-reviewed sources in the thesis that have been cross-referenced in order to ensure their reliability. Furthermore, the choices of references concerning the methodology of this project have been selected in accordance with the thesis manual provided by the Umeå School of Business, Economics, and Statistics. To conclude, we argue that the sources included in this research project are out of high quality since they have been carefully chosen based on their relevance, credibility, and topicality.

3. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework begins by delving into the meaning of work-life balance and New Ways of Working. It later combines the two and informs the reader about what the currently available literature suggests the relationship between the two is. The chapter ends with a presentation of young professionals and the characteristics that follow them as a group.

3.1 Work-Life Balance (WLB)

The term work-life, initially work-family balance and its introduction in both society and literature is heavily embedded in history, starting during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as a political campaign against unfair working conditions (Hogarth & Bosworth, 2009). During the 1960s, research (Lewis et al., 2007) expanded on the perceived difficulties presented to working mothers and women in the workforce in general as a result of the increased female work participation. Traditional views that women should care for the family and children, while the male should be the provider, caused the term work-family to appear and presented a distinct separation between the two domains work and family. In the 1970's the notion that the domains instead were interconnected emerged, arguing that work affected family and vice versa (Khateeb, 2021). Theories such as the Spillover theory (Clark, 2000) began to surface, arguing that what happens in one domain affects and spills over into the other by default. As the traditional view of work-family balance started to shift, researchers (Frame & Hartog, 2003) began to consider work-family to be a business-related issue. Consequently, work-family balance transformed into work-life balance as life was considered to be a more accurate description and could act as an umbrella term. Clark (2000, p. 751) defines work-life balance as the *"... satisfaction and good functioning at home and at work, with a minimum of role conflict."*. OECD (2020) defines work-life balance as *"WLB is about being able to combine family commitments, leisure and work – including both paid and unpaid work".* Kalliath and Brough (2008, p. 326) define work-life balance as *"The individual perception that work and non-work activities are compatible and promote growth in accordance with an individual's current life priorities"*, meaning that work-life domains should not compete for attention but instead, be prioritised adjacently. A vast range of definitions of work-life balance has been presented, focusing on different fields (Khateeb, 2021, pp. 46-47), but all definitions concretize the same main message, having a balance between work and non-work-related activities.

Today, work-life balance is regarded as an integral part of corporate social responsibility (CSR) and equally important for both employer and employee (Frame & Hartog, 2003, p. 359; Syed & Özbilgin, 2019, p. 312). Households with dual earners where both partners in a relationship are income providers are becoming increasingly more common (Lewis et al., 2007; Frame & Hartog, 2003). It in turn puts further stress on the work-life domains, trying to balance different roles such as employee, partner, and parent without causing conflicts between them. In 2010, 95% of fathers and 90% of mothers in America reported the prevalence of conflict between the two spheres, where most were family-related (Williams & Boushey, 2010). Moreover, although society changes and norms with it, women are still experiencing difficulties in finding work-life balance because of traditional gender norms (Syed & Özbilgin, 2019, p. 330). While trying to succeed in their field of work, women are faced with the majority of the responsibilities associated with taking care of children and the household (Houston, 2005). A study by Blair-Loy et al. (2015) attunes to the previous findings by suggesting that females perceive greater interferences between personal life and work than males, presumably due to their dual roles as homemakers and earners.

From an organisational point of view, the trend regarding work-life balance shows that companies are more concerned about what support they can offer to their employees in order to promote work-life balance (Alegre & Pasamar, 2017, p. 828). Improved physical and mental health among workers, decreased employee turnover, and higher performance is some of the effects that organisations stand to gain from implementing positive work-life balance policies (Pasamar, 2015, p. 949). On-site day-care for children, fitness centres, and flexible working hours are already some of the actions taken by employers in order to promote work-life balance among their employees. An indirect effect of companies who implement these policies is their attractiveness on the market, thus being able to stay competitive by employing new talent and retaining existing talent which otherwise could be lost (Harrison et al., 2017, p. 20). Research from Iacovoiu (2020) also showed that there is a positive relationship between organisational support and work-life balance, implying that individuals who experience support from their employer are more likely to achieve work-life balance than if not. Actions such as these also help the companies in creating an image of themselves being proactive in their employee well-being processes, focusing on creating a work environment that aspires trust and respect towards each other (Robak, 2022, p. 471). Another incentive for organisations to continue promoting work-life balance is according to Alegre and Pasamar (2017) the issue of firm innovativeness, showing that innovative firms are generally better at adopting work-life balance policies. From this notion, it is reasonable to assume that employees who experience support from their employers are more likely than those who do not experience it to remain with the company for a longer period of time and help develop it.

Work-life balance has the potential to be a win-win situation for both the employer and the employees, benefiting both equally. Wasay (2013) shows that employees and individuals are more attracted to organisations that show a commitment to work-life balance policies. Connecting these findings to Galinsky and Johnson (1998) who argue that employees that are offered adjustable working conditions, for example, more flexible work hours, are likely to be more satisfied than employees who do not experience the same arrangements. Galinsky and Johnson (1998) also claim that these satisfied workers tend to stay within the company for a longer period of time and, because of their satisfaction, show a higher degree of initiative towards their work and their employer. From an individualistic point of view, experiencing work-life balance also contributes to increased mental and physical health, improved relationships, and a sense of fulfilment (Syed & Özbilgin, 2019, p. 334).

In the case of work-life imbalance, individuals instead experience the negative effects of not being able to maintain a balance between the work-life domains. These negative effects can be the product of a poorly managed work-life balance policy from its employer, or that the individual in question does not take full advantage of existing benefits given (Syed & Özbilgin, 2019, p. 334). Poorly managed policies can also put external pressure on the employee, for example, portrayed as expectations of working overtime, or demands of being available outside of the normal working hours (Chiang et al., 2010). This can in turn create employee internal pressure primarily to the respondents' own ambitions and demands on themselves. Stephens et al. (2007) argue that incorrect use of technology can also negatively affect work-life balance if it causes disruption in an individual's life outside of work. Disruption can for example come from using company mobile devices outside of normal working hours, causing an employee to set aside their personal activities (Lester, 1999). Research from Coffey (1994) has also shown that working long hours and overtime appears to be the common belief on how to show commitment in the corporate environment, at least during the initial phase of one's career. However, Vogel (2012) argues that working more than 40 hours does not necessarily lead to increased productivity, stating that *"The overall output of an employee working 60 hours a week for extended periods of time is no greater*

than an employee doing the standard 40.". In addition to this, research from Sturges and Guest (2004) showed that working longer hours and overtime, in fact, increases the risk of work-life imbalance.

Ultimately, the negative consequences of work-life imbalance can be detrimental for an individual and lead to work-related stress, increased family conflicts, decreased mental and physical health, and lower levels of creativity and initiative of the employee (Hitt et al., 2009; Aryee et al., 2005; Vogel, 2012; Kumarasamy et al., 2015; Major et al., 2002). According to Hitt et al. (2009), it is estimated that costs for companies in the UK, related only to stress issues, accumulate to approximately 3.7 billion pounds per year. When organisations implement work-life balance policies it is according to Yasbek (2004, p. 3) commonly done by measuring the perceived benefits and drawbacks of the policy, in order to determine the net impact. Syed and Özbilgin (2019, p. 315) highlight that the perceived benefits can be more difficult to measure than the drawbacks, leading to the risk of organisations being reluctant to implement work-life balance policies because of weak incentives.

The trend and increased attention towards work-life balance can also be seen from a political perspective. During the beginning of the 21st century, several countries within the EU have implemented political reforms which promote work-life balance (Pasamar, 2015, p. 952). There are still differences between countries in Europe with regards to work-life balance, primarily because of the ideological differentiation between countries as, for example, Sweden where the state is the main social support provider, while in Spain the support comes from the families themselves. Policies implemented by Spain in 2007 to promote work-life balance included an increased paternity leave, aimed at making working days more flexible and thus creating a stronger work-life balance for male employees (Pasamar, 2015, p. 952). Sweden is regarded to be among the most developed countries regarding work-life balance policies (Straub, 2007, p. 295). Not only are there legislative policies implemented by the government to promote work-life balance, but companies are also involved by making their own efforts to assure that their workers obtain work-life balance. For example, by promoting protected work-paternity leave as an incentive for fathers to take care of children at home (Straub, 2007). Although, as previously mentioned, there are fundamental differences which stipulate incentives for work-life balance in Europe, the trend of legislation in connection to work-life balance is positive.

Previous studies have provided conflicting data regarding a possible correlation between experience and work-life balance. An Irish study conducted by Darcy et al. (2012) argues that issues of work-life balance are prevalent over all career phases and that differences are marginal, suggesting that the struggle is not a preserve for parents with young children. Walia (2015) largely confirms this by emphasising that there exists no correlation between experience and the ability to strike a balance between work and personal life, but that it instead is a result of life circumstances. However, another study (Chitra & Sheela, 2013, p. 28) found that age, in fact, is an important demographic variable influencing peoples' perceived work-life balance. The authors propose that the level of perceived work-life balance is higher for younger age groups than for individuals belonging to older age groups. Contrarily to this, other findings by Richert-Kaźmierska and Stankiewicz (2016) who based their study on collected data from Sweden, Finland, and Lithuania, showcased the opposite by finding statistically significant evidence that young people struggle more with maintaining work-life balance than people of an older generation and with more experience. The wide array of answers suggests that there perhaps exist other variables determining the outcome of the results.

3.2 New Ways of Working (NWW)

There is no doubt that the development and implementation of technology have impacted society and the lives of many individuals (Hoonakker & Korunka, 2014, p. 1). Over the last decade, society has witnessed a fundamental change towards a knowledge-based economy and an information society, as noted by Blok et al. (2011, p. 3). Jobs that have existed for a considerable amount of time (e.g., bank teller or steno typist) have almost disappeared and given way to new professions such as database manager or web designer. Apart from the disappearance of certain professions, nearly all and, even the most traditional jobs found in agriculture or construction, have changed tremendously. Technological acceleration has decreased the time it takes to carry out processes, communication, and transportation opening up new opportunities and challenges. A mere two decades ago, obtaining specific information from colleagues or friends involved sending letters through postal services commonly taking several days. In contrast, the sharing of information today is almost instantaneous with access to modern technological solutions such as email, CRM tools, and chat applications. People today also have access to reliable information at the tip of their fingers through online search engines, a process which previously involved visits to libraries or archives. (Hoonakker & Korunka, 2014, pp. 1-2)

The incorporation of technologies within organisations has caused a shift in the design of how companies structure their work (Blok et al., 2011, p. 3; Demerouti et al., 2014, p. 123). At the core of this fresh approach lies the expectations of employees to organise their work flexibly by deciding for themselves when they work, where they work, and how they work (Chung & van der Lippe, 2020, pp. 365-366; Demerouti et al., 2014, p. 123). Demerouti et al. (2014, p. 124) define New Ways of Working as a *"...work design in which employees can control the timing and place of their work while being supported by electronic communication"*. Van Steenbergen et al. (2017) argue that New Ways of Working is an overarching term which has not been thoroughly researched but that the three key characteristics that constitute the term have large amounts of available research. First, the timing of *when* to work has become more flexible since employers have levied the autonomy to choose when to conduct their work on the employees. The old-fashioned assumption that work should be done during office hours has been abandoned since many people do their best work outside of traditional working hours, especially in creative fields (Thomson, 2015). Second, employees can decide *where* they work whether that be at home, during commuting, or at the office where plain open workspaces are increasingly popular (Duxbury & Smart, 2010; Van Steenbergen et al., 2017, p. 737). For instance, remote work, meaning a *"... flexible working arrangement that allows an employee to work from [a] remote location outside of corporate offices"* (Gartner, 2021) is perhaps the most well-known NWW impacting people's lives significantly. Roughly 66% of the US labour force and 53% of the Swedish labour market currently work remotely, at least partly (Netigate, 2021; Flynn, 2022) Lastly, New Ways of Working are facilitated by the connectedness made possible through information technology and the introduction of digital solutions at the workplace (Van Steenbergen et al., 2017, p. 737).

New Ways of Working as an overarching concept by itself has only been scarcely researched. However, the three components above mentioned (*remote work, flexible hours,* and *information technology*) making up the term individually have large bodies of research available (Van Steenbergen et al., 2017, p. 737). The organisational incorporation of flexible work arrangements is increasingly becoming the new normal, leading to new opportunities for both employers and employees. Consensus between organisations appears to be that it increases efficiency, reduces turnover and organisational costs, and increases overall job satisfaction (Chung & van der Lippe, 2020, pp. 365-366; Demerouti et al., 2014, p. 125). However, Blok et al. (2011, p. 4) highlight that while this may be the consensus, most

employers lack a comprehensive understanding of the long-term effects of NWWs. One group of people taking advantage of the opportunities emerging as a result of these new flexible work arrangements are digital nomads. Digital nomads refer to people who location-independently utilise technology to perform their work tasks while living a nomadic lifestyle (Hayes, 2021). In other words, they commonly perform their work at hotels or cafes when the time suits them best due to the freedom that the arrangement presents (Hayes, 2021). While this group may be seen as extreme in terms of utilising NWWs, there is, according to Korver (2006, cited in Van Steenbergen et al., 2017, p. 737) growing adaptation of flexible work arrangements in all fields due to globalisation, increased competition, and a fundamental economic shift from goods to services.

3.2.1 New Ways of Working and Challenges to Work-life Balance

How do New Ways of Working impact people's work-life balance? As mentioned above, Blok et al. (2011, p. 4) emphasise the fact that since these methods are fairly new, most employers lack a comprehensive understanding of the long-term effects both on the employer and employee. However, based on the available literature, it appears to be a double-edged sword where its impact varies depending on the type of work considered, presenting both opportunities and challenges to work-life balance. Bhuvaneswari et al. (2022) discovered that technological advancements redefine the traditional boundaries between work and personal life since the different spheres now are more integrated than ever before. Choudhury et al. (2020) discovered that employee productivity increases with no increase in rework rates when an individual gets to perform their tasks at their preferred location outside of work. Another study conducted by Felstead and Henseke (2017) suggests that location-independent work can lead to higher organisational commitment, better job satisfaction, and increased job-related well-being but that it comes at a cost of work intensification and a greater inability to disconnect. Furthermore, the work setup outside of work is, according to Arbetsmiljöverket (2021), the responsibility of the employer to ensure it is ergonomically adjusted even though it is difficult to monitor.

Moreover, in another study by Shagvaliyeva and Yazdanifard (2014), moderately flexible working hours may improve work-life balance by lowering stress levels and, as a result, help people better balance their obligations to both personal and professional lives. Contrarily, people with more extreme flexibility in their work schedules during non-traditional working hours instead encountered more mental health problems and struggled increasingly with their quality of sleep compared to a control group of people with non-flexible working hours (Martens et al., 1999, p. 44).

New ways of Working may also help facilitate increased parental involvement with children since the flexibility that the work arrangements offer increases freedom to adapt to their needs (Chung & van der Lippe, 2020, p. 374). Another study conducted by Chung and Van der Horst (2017, pp. 66-68) found that NWW can help mothers stay employed after childbirth and help them cope with family commitments during periods of increased demand. This in turn may increase women's satisfaction and ability to achieve work-life balance. However, while flexible work arrangements can facilitate the balance, they may also traditionalize gender roles and increase the gender pay gap (Chung & van der Lippe, 2020, p. 366; Lott & Chung, 2016). Men are expected to utilise flexible arrangements to increase performance through workload/intensity and are rewarded with higher salaries, which can complicate their work-life balance through the expansion of work (Lott & Chung, 2016, pp. 762-763). Women are, however, expected to increase their responsibilities to the family when working flexibly (Hilbrecht et al., 2008) which potentially could cause conflict between work and personal life, but unlike men not being increasingly compensated due to different expectations (Chung & van der Lippe, 2020, p. 366). Williams et al. (2013) further

underscore how flexible work arrangements can negatively impact a person's career development since the prioritisation of personal commitments deviates from the ideal worker image.

As showcased above, NWW may influence work-family conflict in both positive and negative ways. Nevertheless, the usage may also impact people's physical and mental health. Research by Ferreira et al. (2022) suggests that sickness presenteeism is the new normal because of the rapid increase of remote work caused by the Covid pandemic. Speaking of the pandemic, a study conducted by Bertoni et al. (2022, p. 14) found that remote work during the Covid pandemic had a detrimental effect on depression and the overall mental health of workers, suggesting that remote work may be a public health concern, reaching beyond the pandemic. This is further supported by a 2023 report by ISS Facility Services, which found that most young professionals in Sweden felt under stimulated by remote work and that one out of every five individuals experience feelings of depression as a result of remote work compared to only 8% of 41-50-year-olds (Nenasheva, 2023). According to additional research (Elbogen et al., 2022) the absence of in-person social connections when working remotely, particularly when using digital meetings, increases feelings of anxiety, social isolation, and emotional exhaustion.

3.3 Young Professionals

The term 'Young Professionals' is ambiguous and currently lacks a unanimously agreed upon definition. However, it can be summarised as individuals typically in their 20s or early 30s who have recently graduated from university or completed some form of vocational training and are in the early phases of their careers (Brome, 2009, p. 1; Tshishonga, 2022, pp. 99-100). Its exact origin is unknown but is believed to have evolved from its original narrow meaning referring to a young person working in a professional field (Arora & Francis, 1998, p. 4). Due to the elusiveness of the term, this research project will define young professionals as individuals between the ages of 22-28 obtaining a white-collar job and are in the early phases of their careers. As per the definition above, young professionals solely consist of individuals belonging to Generation Z, hereinafter referred to as '*Gen Z*', also known as Generation I, Gen Tech, Digital Natives, or Gen Wii, (Singh & Dangmei, 2016, p. 2). According to several sources (Dimock, 2019; Francis & Hoefel, 2018; Schroth, 2019, p. 5; Sladek & Grabinger, 2014; Seemiller & Grace, 2019) this generation commonly includes individuals born between 1995/1997-2010/2013 depending on the source at hand. There is no official body that determines when one generation finishes and another one begins, which is why the dates vary by 1-2 years depending on the source (Seemiller & Grace, 2019). Nevertheless, this study will use the 1995–2010 age range because it has been used frequently in prior market research (Seemiller & Grace, 2019) and because it is more in line with the aforementioned definition of young professionals. The members of Gen Z have come of age during a time of significant global events and technological advancements, including a worldwide economic recession, growing concerns about global warming, and the widespread adoption of mobile technology (Rothman, 2016, p. 2). Although Gen Z shares many similar characteristics with the millennial generation (European Labour Authority, 2023), they also exhibit unique patterns and behaviours not found anywhere else, namely their lack of experience and technological reliance (Schroth, 2019, p. 5; Singh & Dangmei, 2016, p. 2).

Differences between generations in terms of behaviour and values are confounded with changes due to ageing, experience, life stage, and career phase (Cennamo & Gardner, 2008, p. 892). While Millennials tend to value work-life balance, lifestyles, and international opportunities (Zemke et al., 2000, cited in Cennamo & Gardner, 2008, p. 893), research has

shown that Gen Z is the most driven and goal-oriented generation to date since they value personal achievements and monetary rewards in favour of family and other variables (Barna, 2016; European Labour Authority, 2023). Other research conducted by Kirchmayer and Fratričová (2018, p. 6027) largely aligns with these findings as they found that individuals of Gen Z do not prioritise work-life balance and flexibility when considering future employment opportunities. However, the authors highlighted that the findings should be carefully interpreted since the individuals belonging to Gen Z have limited work experience, suggesting that previous experiences may act as an influential factor (Kirchmayer & Fratričová, 2018). If previous experiences act as influential factors in an individual's attitude towards work-life balance, then Gen Z is especially vulnerable. Sladek and Grabinger (2014) together with Fry and Parker (2018) further revealed that Gen Z enters adulthood with significantly less work experience than previous generations. In fact, their data shows that only 58% of 18-21-year-olds in 2018 had worked in the prior year, a significantly lower number than the 72% millennials exhibited in 2002. Despite the probability of many explanations as to why Gen Z has less work experience entering adulthood, the two most common explanations appear to be that Gen Zers come from more affluent households with higher median incomes and that the increased competition to get into higher education forces this generation to partake in extracurricular activities in favour of working (Fry & Parker, 2018). Another more recent, possible explanation is that the pandemic impacted young adults' abilities to find employment due to the decrease in available positions (Institute of Student Employers, 2021). Nevertheless, Gen Z appears to have less work experience than previous generations, something that influences their views on work-life balance and difficulties in maintaining one.

Another characteristic that sets them apart is, according to Singh and Dangmei (2016, p. 2) that their identity is deeply related to technological connectedness. They are, in other words, 'digital natives' meaning that technology and digital devices have always been an integral part of their lives and they are unfamiliar with a world without it (Singh & Dangmei, 2016, p. 2). Both their reliance and intensity of usage are inherently different from other generations. According to a study by Adobe in 2018 (cited in Walker, 2022), millennials spend an average of 8.5 hours per day on their digital devices, while Gen Z spends a staggering 10.6 hours. Out of these hours 10.6 hours, more than 6 hours are spent on mobile devices and almost 3 hours on social media (Viens, 2019; Walker, 2022). Aligning with this is Faverio's research (2022), indicating that almost half (48%) of young adults aged 18 to 29 reported being online "almost constantly." In contrast, only 22% of those aged 50 to 64 and 8% of those aged 65 and above reported the same level of constant online engagement. There may exist many reasons why young adults are increasingly connected, however, Kim et al. (2021) claim that this is because Gen Z is inherently curious and embraces new technologies with enthusiasm not seen in previous generations. Rothman (2016) even goes as far as to argue that their brains are structured differently with a larger emphasis on visual imagery due to the environment they have been exposed to growing up. It is, however, evident that their reliance on technology and intensity of use is unique to this generation.

Unfortunately, tech usage also comes with a dark side. Being constantly exposed to technology while growing up has caused Gen Z to have a lower average attention span of only 8 seconds than other generations such as millennials with 12 seconds (Rothman, 2016, p. 2; Patel, 2017). Consequently, individuals belonging to Gen Z may, to a larger extent, struggle with concentration and their ability to analyse complex problems due to their limited attention span (Rothman, 2016, p. 2). As mentioned above, Gen Z has the highest exposure to screens out of all generations (Walker, 2022), which is a phenomenon that also has been associated with an increased occurrence of mental health problems, more notably anxiety and depressive symptoms (Wu et al., 2016, pp. 4-6). Other research conducted by

Harvard Medical School (cited in Ruder, 2019) indicates that the use of screen devices emitting blue light, such as smartphones, before going to bed can disturb the natural sleep cycle by inhibiting the release of the melatonin hormone. Sleep deficiency has been linked to elevated stress levels and impaired decision-making abilities which could impact both the personal and professional spheres of life. By making sub-optimal decisions at work, a person may experience an additional workload, unexpected work from home, and higher levels of stress. (Clayton, 2020) The findings of Clayton may partly help explain the results of a report submitted by Smith and Anderson (2018) revealing that young adults between the ages of 18-29 struggle more with disconnecting from work outside of working hours than adults over the age of 30.

Apart from the abovementioned characteristics, there exist many more defining characteristics for this generation. A study conducted by McKinsey found that Gen Zers value individual expressions, are pragmatic and analytical, and believe that conflicts can be handled through dialogue (Francis & Hoefel, 2018). Other research presented by Sladek and Grabinger (2014) also found that these individuals are realistic, creative, and constantly connected. There is no doubt that this generation is both unique and complex in terms of their behavioural qualities shaped by the societal events embossing their upbringing.

4. Practical Method

This chapter presents the steps taken to collect the data including the choices regarding data collection, interview structure, data quality, and data analysis. Finally, the chapter presents our ethical considerations taken into account throughout the research process and how we as researchers adhere to them.

4.1 Qualitative data

The quality and depth of the collected data are two important factors that the interpretivist approach emphasises. Qualitative research data is better adapted to provide a comprehensive understanding of social phenomena compared to quantitative data due to its ability to incorporate the subjective opinions and personal experiences of the participants. This incorporation of qualitative data increases its degree of detail and refinement (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p. 52; Lenger, 2019, p. 950). Qualitative data collection offers flexibility to the researchers, as they can alter the course of investigation easier than quantitative data collection (Bryman & Bell, 2015, pp. 408-409). Among quantitative researchers, a common criticism of qualitative research is that its subjective nature undermines the objectivity of the findings and, therefore, limits the perspective of the study (Bryman & Bell, 2015, p. 413). In contrast to qualitative data collection, quantitative interviews are usually highly standardised and rigid in their structure, offering less flexibility because researchers prioritise answers that can be easily coded and quantified. In quantitative research, a questionnaire can be viewed as a sturdy framework that is systematically worked through. Diverging from the path of the questionnaire can potentially compromise the outcome of the interview and ultimately the validity and credibility of the research (Bryman & Bell, 2015, pp. 480-481). Furthermore, since quantitative data collection generally pertains to natural science, a positivist paradigm approach serves as the most appropriate. Here, researchers seek to identify one objective reality that can be measured, thus not setting out to gain a deeper understanding of a social phenomenon (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p. 46).

Another critique against qualitative research put forth by quantitative researchers is the issue of transparency. Critics argue that qualitative researchers do not always provide enough explanations or reasoning behind their choices, making it difficult to grasp from an academic point of view. Depending on the preferences of the researchers, the same study can arrive at different conclusions, which makes quality research difficult to replicate. (Bryman & Bell, 2015, p. 414)

For us to answer our research question effectively and accurately, we need to understand what challenges influence work-life balance. This demands that we ask in-depth questions as well as follow-up questions; otherwise, we could not possibly gain a deep enough understanding of their reality. In addition to this, our respondents must be allowed to expand on their reasoning, without being hindered by a strict interview structure. This made us rule out the option of using a quantitative data collection method in favour of a qualitative data collection method. We are confident that this choice will act as a facilitator, allowing both of us as researchers and our interviewees to expand on the complexities faced during the research process.

4.2 Structure of the interviews

Interviews can have a higher or lower degree of formality, depending on the nature of the research and the structure of the interview itself. Typically, there are three types of

interviews; structured, semi-structured and unstructured, with an additional separation between standardised and non-standardised interviews (Saunders et al., 2012, p. 374).

We have adopted a semi-structured style of interview for our research, as we deemed it to be the most suitable structure to successfully obtain the information needed. Semi-structured interviews combine characteristics of both structured and unstructured interviews. The researchers have a set of predetermined questions they aim to cover but also offer flexibility for the interview to explore new questions based on the respondents' answers, thus going more in-depth (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p. 133). Semi-structured interviews also imply that the respondent is the centre of attention where the interviewer actively listens to the experiences and opinions of the interviewee, seeking to understand their point of view which enables richer data collection. Implementing a semi-structure to the interviews provides us as interviewers greater freedom to expand the interview beyond the predetermined questions of the interview guide. Having this structure also allows us to alter the line of questioning during the course of the interview, therefore being able to ask follow-up questions to gain a deeper understanding, while later circling back to a previously unanswered question. Because of the nature of our questions in the interview guide, demanding rather complex reflections from the respondents, we argued with support from Saunders et al. (2012, p. 377) that neither structured nor unstructured interview styles would have been appropriate. A structured interview would have been too rigid and not flexible enough to obtain in-depth answers as it tends to focus on yes or no answers (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p. 207). On the other hand, an unstructured interview could have caused problems for us in analysing the interviews because of an overload of information that might not have been as relevant to the study.

Structured interviews are usually highly standardised questionnaires that do not allow the respondent to give in-depth answers but rather a yes or no, later being codified into quantifiable data and thus most appropriate for quantitative research (Saunders et al., 2012, p. 374). Semi-structured interviews are non-standardised and more flexible than structured interviews, offering greater freedom for the researchers to ask open questions and in-depth follow-up questions. The interviewer will typically have made questions prior to the interview regarding the main topics but is not restricted to adding additional questions during the interview (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p. 133). Semi-structured interviews are popular in qualitative research because they allow the respondent to give nuanced insights into their personal experiences, creating a better understanding for the researcher (Bryman & Bell, 2015, p. 480). Because the interview is semi-structured and the interviewer can divert from the interview guide, it demands a high degree of interview skill from the researchers as they need to obtain the information needed under less structured conditions (Lenger, 2019, p. 5). Our previous experience in conducting interviews paired with our deep knowledge of the topic caused us to feel confident in our abilities as interviewers to handle a less structured interview approach. The last interview style is unstructured interviews which is a non-standardised approach with a high degree of informality. The researcher is not bound by any predetermined questions and typically the interview is structured similarly to an informal conversation between two individuals (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p. 135). As a consequence, researchers expose themselves to the risk of obtaining information in large quantities which might not be of relevance to the research, creating difficulties with data analysis.

4.3 Sampling method

Our research has relied upon purposive sampling which is a sampling method where the researchers handpick respondents themselves based on the respondents' own experiences

that would be relevant to the topic of the study (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 237; Collis & Hussey, 2014, p. 132). As researchers, we are aware of the limitations that the purposive sampling method presents, more specifically that the sample can be biased and therefore lack generalizability in terms of the results. We did reach out to interesting candidates directly through LinkedIn or similar networks raising the issue of potential biases in our choice of candidate. However, according to Alvesson and Sandberg (2021, p. 408), our personal influence on the research process does not necessarily have to be a disadvantage but could instead act as an advantage. Based on this, we argued that our selective, yet personal judgement was an advantage since we could ensure a diverse and accurate sample of respondents. With this sampling method, we were able to achieve an equal spread between male and female respondents, as well as to include several different industries. Thus, removing potential skewness based on the characteristics of gender or a single industry that could affect the results. Our ability to diversify the sample through purposive sampling both in terms of demographics, and also in terms of experience, profession, and industry, mitigated the risks of biases and increased the generalizability of the study.

The relatively small sample size of our study is another reason for our choice of purposive sampling since it is generally suitable for smaller sample sizes and/or when the researchers regard certain individuals as particularly knowledgeable (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 237). Although a common issue with qualitative research is the uncertainty related to the number of respondents needed to achieve theoretical saturation (Bryman, 2012, p. 425), we deemed ourselves confident with respect to the limitations of the study, that saturation was reached after 8 interviews. Before conducting any of the interviews, we believed that 10 interviews would be needed to reach this point of theoretical saturation but realised that patterns in the responses appeared much earlier than that allowing for a clear presentation of our results. As always, more interviews could have been conducted to ensure even higher applicability and generalizability of the results. However, with the saturation experienced, we would have had to expand the scope of the study to deem additional interviews justifiable.

4.4 Preparations and interview guide

It is important to be well-prepared and have a solid pre-understanding of the subject at hand before conducting any type of interview, as this increases the quality of the interview and the respondents' understanding of the questions (Saunders et al., 2012, p. 384). Before we created the structure for the interview guide, we read through large amounts of academic literature, both about the subject and what is necessary to consider when conducting semi-structured interviews. Furthermore, work-life balance and new ways of working have been of interest to both of us and present during our previous studies. Therefore, we deemed ourselves to be knowledgeable about the subject and well-suited to conduct these interviews. Because we used purposive sampling, we already knew some background information about the respondents. This made it possible to focus on the most important parts of the interview, spending less time on basic background questions.

Prior to the first interview, we discussed the option of having a test interview, similar to what can be used for questionnaires when conducting quantitative data (Saunders et al., 2012, p. 451). The advantage of having a test interview is that it allows the researchers to review the interview questions and ensure that the respondents understand the questions, thus having time to make any alterations before moving on to the main sample (Saunders et al., 2012, p. 451). Conducting a test interview does however pose a disadvantage in the risk of taking too much time from the research process. Time has been a major limitation to our study and, therefore, we decided that we would not include a test interview. We

acknowledge the fact that our interview guide could have been further improved if time would have allowed it, but we did not encounter any major issues with how it was structured.

The structure and design of the interview guide were based on the identified research gap formulated in the problem formulation along with the actual research question. As illustrated in Table 1, the interview guide is divided into three main sections, with each section having a different objective. The first section aspires to gather a holistic understanding of our respondents to enable a good comparison between the different respondents. The second section aims to investigate how the respondents themselves define work-life balance, their opinions, and what challenges they experience in general. Lastly, the final section delves deep into the interplay between technology and work-life balance and collects information regarding the potential difficulties that technology levies on employees.

Table 1: Visualisation of the interview guide

	Theme	Objective
1	Background	The objective is to obtain a holistic understanding of the interviewee, enabling the comparison of responses among different respondents.
2	Work-Life Balance	Perspective on the concept and how they value it
3	Interplay between Work-Life balance & NWW	The role NWW and technology plays in their ability to obtain a balance between work and personal life

4.5 Practical collections of data

Traditionally, interviews in business research have been regarded as favourable to conduct face-to-face because it makes it possible for participants to interpret non-verbal communication while also facilitating the development of a trustworthy relationship (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p. 134; Saunders et al., 2012, p. 375). However, Thunberg and Arnell (2021, p. 757) argue that sentiments changed after the Covid-19 pandemic when it became apparent that meetings online were a viable substitution for traditional physical interviews. Online meetings make issues concerning qualitative data collection, such as geographical and financial factors, less challenging, since it is both cost-effective and does not demand participants to be in the same place (Thunberg & Arnell, 2021, p. 758). Although we would have liked to conduct the interviews in person, our respondents were scattered around Sweden, causing us to disregard physical interviews as a viable option due to both time and money constraints. Furthermore, the topic investigated is related to the usage of digital solutions to conduct their work, meaning that our sample of young professionals between the ages of 22-28 likely already was accustomed to the usage of digital meetings. Because of that, we deemed it an appropriate option and by using Zoom, the interviewers and the interviewee could both hear and see each other in real-time with the ability to record the interview, which later made it easier to transcribe.

Digital interviews do, however, pose challenges since technical difficulties may decrease the quality of the interview and body language becomes increasingly more difficult to interpret when only parts of the interviewee are visible throughout the interview (Janghorban et al., 2014; Thunberg & Arnell, 2021, p. 757). While we rarely experienced technical difficulties, we did occasionally reflect on the lack of body language present,

although we did not see it as a major problem impacting the quality of the results. In fact, Novick (2008, p. 395) claims that there is no proof that the lack of non-verbal cues would cause data to be lost or less rich; on the contrary, it would cause more disclosure, which could result in richer data. In the end, we argued that the benefits of digital interviews outweighed the disadvantages causing us to move on with a digital method of collecting data.

During all interviews, there were two interviewers and one interviewee present. Although the most common form of interview is between one interviewer and one interviewee, we found support from Collis and Hussey (2014, p. 135) claiming that having two interviewers can offer a greater possibility to delve deeper into topics and make sure that they are fully explored. While one interviewer was leading the interview and asking the main questions, the other interviewer focused on taking notes and asking any necessary follow-up questions. With an additional interviewer, we also minimised the difficulties of keeping track of the time since the one taking notes could also make sure that the interview did not extend beyond our preferred time frame.

4.5.1 Presentation of respondents

All the respondents were at the time of the study between 23-27 years old and therefore all part of Gen Z, with an average age of 25 and a median age of 24. Additionally, all interviews had a duration of at least 41 minutes, with an average length of 46 minutes. All participants obtained white-collar jobs scattered around Sweden, with work experience ranging between 9 months to 3.5 years. The number of respondents corresponds to 8 and is divided equally between the two genders.

To ensure the anonymity of our respondents, their identities have been coded; accordingly, Respondent 1 (R1), Respondent 2 (R2), Respondent 3 (R3), Respondent 4 (R4), Respondent 5 (R5), Respondent 6 (R6), Respondent 7 (R7), and Respondent 8 (R8). To further guarantee our respondents' personal integrity, we have deliberately omitted certain details that could be traced back to the identity of our respondents. Table 2, seen below, contains the full list of respondents in addition to demographic variables, as well as the date and duration of each interview.

Table 2: Information of the respondents and interviews

Codified name	**Age**	**Gender**	**Industry**	**Work experience**	**Date**	**Duration**
Respondent 1 (R1)	24	Female	Tech	1 year, 5 months	27/4–2023	48 minutes
Respondent 2 (R2)	24	Male	Audit	9 months	2/5–2023	41 minutes
Respondent 3 (R3)	27	Male	Transport	9 months	2/5–2023	53 minutes
Respondent 4 (R4)	26	Male	Real Estate	3 years, 6 months	3/5–2023	50 minutes
Respondent 5 (R5)	24	Female	Union	1 year, 6 months	4/5–2023	45 minutes

Respondent 6 (R6)	24	Female	Recruitment	9 months	4/5–2023	42 minutes
Respondent 7 (R7)	26	Female	Finance	1 year, 6 months	8/5–2023	41 minutes
Respondent 8 (R8)	23	Male	Tech	2 years	9/5–2023	49 minutes

4.6 Recording, transcribing, and interview language

Recordings are beneficial since the interviewers do not have to take extensive notes during the interview and can instead focus not only on *what* was said but also on *how* it was said by paying attention to non-verbal communication (Saunders, 2009, p. 339). Due to the above-mentioned reasons, we strived to record all the conducted interviews. However, it is, according to Bryman and Bell (2015, p. 494), not uncommon for some respondents to feel uncomfortable with their answers being recorded, which is why it is crucial to ask for permission before initiating any type of recording. We managed to get permission through a consent form from all of our respondents to record the audio of the interview, which enabled us to focus our attention on the respondents' body language and our ability to ask relevant follow-up questions. In our opinion, this method improved the process of conducting the interviews and potentially ended up with more comprehensive results than if another method had been chosen. Not only did it improve the interview process, but it also resulted in us being able to examine the material thoroughly and multiple times, avoiding the risk of missing out on vital information by addressing the constraints of our humanly flawed memory. Since all the interviews were held through the Zoom application, we utilised the built-in recording tool on at least 2 devices to minimise the potential loss due to any malfunctioning. Having the audio files further simplified the transcription process, which according to the literature (Bryman & Bell 2015, p. 495; Collis & Hussey 2014, p. 166; Oliver et al., 2005, p. 1273), can be a time-consuming yet crucial task for researchers whose importance frequently is underestimated. It is commonly viewed as a data management ‘chore’ happening behind the scenes but is a pivotal point of any qualitative research project (Oliver et al., 2005, p. 1273). While we argue that there exist more stimulating parts of a research project, we do acknowledge the importance of making a reliable transcript as a basis for the extraction of the results, or as Saunders et al. (2009, p. 485) define it *“data cleaning”*. In this project, we have utilised software tools to help streamline the process without compromising the quality. By leveraging the audio-to-text function in Microsoft Word, we were able to quickly get a rough transcript of the conducted interviews, which we later could improve upon by going through the files manually to ensure their accuracy and reliability lived up to the requirements. Naturally, the transcriptions were done in Swedish due to the interview language being Swedish, and the extraction of results was then translated.

In an interview situation, language is an essential form of communication used to express stimuli, provide context, and encode responses. Therefore, the choices researchers make regarding the interview language will impact their ability to collect valuable information. (Johnson et al., 2018, p. 295) We decided to conduct all the interviews in Swedish, despite the official language of this research project being English. The decision was largely based on the fact that both the respondents and researchers of this project were native Swedish speakers. This minimised the potential of language barriers hindering the collection of responses and instead allowed all participants to express themselves in their most comfortable language. Furthermore, the context of the study is young professionals in the

Swedish labour market, causing us to deem the Swedish language as the most appropriate one. This presented us with additional work since we ended up translating the transcription of the interviews into Swedish as accurately as possible based on our own abilities. Nevertheless, we do acknowledge that this poses a risk of information loss since meanings and contexts do not always translate well between languages (Cassel, 2015, p. 48). In the end, we argued that the potential of obtaining valuable information justified the minimal risk of wrong transitions.

4.7 Data quality

Under the interpretivist paradigm, qualitative research should according to Morse et al. (2002) strive towards ensuring that sources and the research process in its entirety is trustworthy. To achieve this, researchers must uphold both reliability as well as validity throughout the course of the research.

4.7.1 Reliability & lack of standardisation

Qualitative research is often questioned about its reliability and lack of standardisation because it is hard to replicate a qualitative study and ensure that the result remains the same. (Saunders et al., 2012, p. 192). Qualitative research is commonly used while researching subjective topics where biases, both from respondents and the researchers themselves, are present which can have an influence on the outcome of the study. Two of the most common biases in literature in connection to qualitative research are interviewer bias (Bryman & Bell, 2014, p. 208) and researcher bias (Saunders et al., 2012, p. 192). Both biases are rooted in the potential risk that the researcher's subjective opinions are transferred onto the interviewee through the behaviour of the interviewer. The response from the interviewee can therefore be affected by the body language or tone of voice from the interviewer, thus being biased. Contrary to qualitative research, quantitative is more rigid and standardised in both structure and data collection which makes its reliability stronger (Lewis, 2009, p. 8). Because quantitative research is more standardised and less subjective, it makes it easier to replicate by other researchers since the collected data should be the same.

Although issues against qualitative research and its reliability have been raised, qualitative research investigates a phenomenon at a specific point in time, thus by its nature not necessarily striving to be replicable (Saunders et al., 2012, p. 382). Subjectivity itself is subject to change and what is measured from one point in time will therefore change to another, while both time frames can have reliability for that specific context (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). To increase reliability, we have aimed at explaining each choice we have made throughout the research process to the best of our abilities and, by doing so, limiting the risk of misinterpretation by others as well as accounting for potential biases.

4.7.2 Validity

Validity can according to Leung (2015, p. 325) be described as the *"appropriateness"* of the theoretical and practical choices made regarding the nature and context of the research. Validity is not limited to specific parts of the research but penetrates all parts of the research process from beginning to end. Research question(s) must be carefully formulated in order to achieve the desired outcome of the study. Methodology choices rest on the validity of the research design and ultimately the choices of sampling need to be appropriate to successfully present reliable results. As our research is grounded in the interpretivist paradigm, all parts of the study and our processes should reflect the appropriate choices to assure validity.

In a qualitative research study such as ours, where interviews, previous literature and observations are the main sources of information, we have used triangulation (Lewis, 2009, p. 11) to achieve higher validity in our findings. Triangulation refers to location, or identifying, the unknown with the help of already known facts or information, where the more known points supporting the same result render a higher validity for the findings (Mwita, 2022, p. 535). Under the interpretivist approach, we acknowledge that there is more than one valid reality, meaning that each respondent in our study reflects their own true reality as they see it. Therefore, we have several unknown points which we try to identify and validate by triangulating with known points from interviews, previous literature, and observations.

4.8 Data analysis

According to Gioia (2020), it is not unusual to feel overwhelmed while reviewing collected qualitative data because of its sheer size in quantity. Our data analysis has adopted already proven steps by previous researchers (Gioia et al., 2013; Gioia, 2020; Løland & Hällgren, 2022; Corley & Gioia, 2004), ensuring that it is appropriate to our study. In order to analyse our collected data and present it in a comprehensible manner, we began with transcribing all interviews which have been described in detail in previous chapters. After finishing all the transcripts, we read through them to identify points of interest from our respondents regarding our research question. We have noted these initial points of interest as *First-order codes* (see Figure 1) and they can be interpreted as the essence behind various quotes from the interviewees. By finding commonalities and patterns from our first-order codes, we were able to construct the second level in our data structure which is noted as *Second-order codes*. One can think of the second-order codes as a summary of the relationship between the first-order codes, falling under an umbrella term such as *Flexible Hours*, *Overtime* or *Value change*. Lastly, after identifying common denominators for our second-order codes, we identified the main themes and noted them as *Aggregated dimensions.* The aggregated dimensions were concluded as *Struggle adapting to New Ways of Working*, *Difficulty Setting Boundaries*, and *Lack of Experience*.

The presentation of our result will follow the structure of Figure 1, seen below, where the aggregated dimensions will act as the main challenges for young professionals to strike a work-life balance. For each aggregated dimension, the respective second-order codes will be presented with their content originating from the quotes and interest points of the first-order codes.

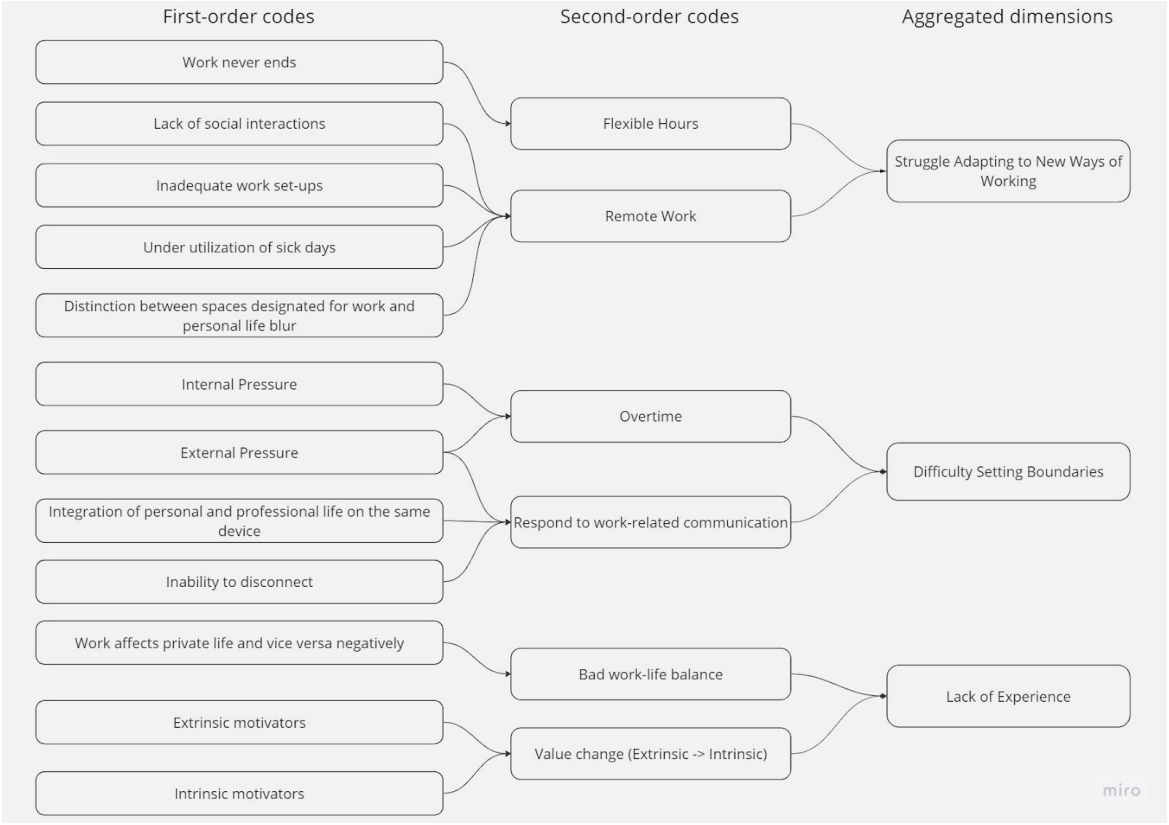

Figure 1: Data structure

4.9 Ethical considerations

All researchers must take ethical principles into consideration while conducting research (Saunders et al., 2009; Bryman & Bell, 2015). Ethics in connection to business research emphasise how participants in the study should be treated and what activities the researchers should avoid being associated with (Bryman & Bell, 2015, p. 129). During this thesis, we as researchers have valued the ethical aspects of research highly. By adhering to the ethical guidelines presented below (Table 2) by Bell and Bryman (2007, p. 71) together with the authors' considerations, we are proud of the moral spirit that pervades the work.

Table 3: The ethical principles of research

Ethical principles presented by Bell and Bryman (2007, p. 71).	**Actions taken by us as researchers to honour those ethical principles.**
Harm to participants Researchers must ensure that the participants of the study do not come to any harm, either mentally or physically, during the study or afterwards as a result of the participation.	All interviews have been conducted through Zoom or other online video communication tools. This has allowed participants to choose their own location, thus ensuring their physical safety and well-being. During the interviews, only questions relevant to the study were asked and topics that were deemed too sensitive were omitted to avoid any mental discomfort for the respondent.
Dignity The requirement that researchers should respect the dignity and integrity of the respondents, or other parties involved, to avoid creating discomfort or anxiety.	In order to live up to these requirements, the respondents themselves have been given the option to suggest when they want to be interviewed, both time and date. Respondents have also been given the option to conduct the interview with both audio and video or only audio.

Informed consent and privacy Participants in the study should be fully informed about what the research aims to answer and that their consent is approved, together with the privacy protection of the participants.	Prior to the start of every interview, participants were informed about their right to end the interview at any given point and that the information retrieved during the interview only is to be used during the scope of the research. Furthermore, information collected during the interviews is only shared between the researchers and thus protected from outside parties.
Confidentiality and anonymity Researchers must ensure that information collected during interviews cannot be traced back to a specific individual or organisation.	All interviewees were informed about their confidentiality and that their participation will be completely anonymous, the same information was later repeated before the start of each interview
Deception Information and research data must not be presented in a misleading or false way that could be portrayed as lies.	To create a baseline of trust between the researchers and the respondents, we presented background information about the study and ourselves to ensure that the respondent felt comfortable answering the questions honestly. After each interview the respondents were given the chance to ask questions of their own, ensuring that no questions were left unanswered from either party.
Affiliation The requirement for the researchers to state any professional or personal affiliations that could create a conflict of interest and therefore jeopardise the quality of the research.	As this research is not sponsored or funded by any outside party, there are no professional affiliations that could pose a conflict of interest.
Honesty and Transparency Communication between all parties involved, regarding information relevant to the study, should be transparent throughout the scope of the entire research to maintain a high level of trust.	All respondents have been informed about the purpose of the study as well as the meaning of their participation, upholding a high degree of transparency and honesty.
Reciprocity Both the respondent and the researcher(s) should equally benefit from the interview, not leaving one or the other at a disadvantage.	After each interview, when we deemed our questions to be answered, we offered the respondent to ask questions if they had any. This gave the respondent the opportunity to reflect or add to their answers, as well as ask questions about the study itself which also showed to be beneficial for us as researchers and interviewers.
Misrepresentation Researchers need to avoid misunderstandings, misrepresenting or falsely when presenting the collected research data	Because we are students at Umeå University, we follow a well-structured thesis manual created by the faculty of our department. By clearly defining the purpose of the study as well as the research question and relevant background, we provide an easy-to-follow structure for the reader which should minimise the risk of any misunderstanding or misleading.

5. Results

The following chapter will present the results of the interviews and will later serve as the foundation for the discussion and analysis. The obtained results are presented based on the aggregated dimensions illustrated in Figure 1. The first section delves into the challenges that New Ways of Working pose to work-life balance. The subsequent section reveals the difficulties in setting boundaries. Lastly, the final section aims to explain how experience influences young professionals' ability to balance professional and personal life.

5.1 Struggle Adapting to New Ways of Working

Albeit experiencing challenges related to it, the respondents appear to see new ways of working as the 'new normal' and the freedom that follows as the only viable option. Respondent 7 says that *"We are used to these ways of working, especially since the pandemic, but employers are working on bringing people back into the office again, something a lot of people do not want to be forced into, causing conflict"*. Respondent 4 claims the freedom to set his own agenda of working, in terms of when and where, is absolutely necessary to even be able to carry out his work tasks. However, while new ways of working are expected by young professionals, these structures pose challenges towards their balance between work and personal life. Respondent 2 expands on this, stating that *"... it has not made work-life balance easier, perhaps even the opposite since most of us now can work anywhere, anytime"*.

5.1.1 Remote work

All our respondents engage in remote work, to various degrees. Whether it be partial or complete, remote work constitutes an integral part of our respondents' work tasks. *"When everywhere can be your workplace, it is more likely to become it"* is a quote taken from Respondent 5 when asked about her experiences surrounding remote work and work-life balance. The quote illustrates a common theme among the respondents where they tend to experience difficulties separating the places where they work from where they perform their personal tasks. Respondent 4 expresses that *"... [remote work] especially at home creates a problem of separating the free time from worktime since they are performed at the same place. It might work great for some, but it can become problematic if you're not disciplined"*. The fact that many young professionals also live in very small or shared accommodations further complicates the issue. Respondent 2 claims that *"...since I work from home in my bedroom, where I sleep like 2 metres from my desk, I feel like the distance between me being free or working has decreased".* Respondent 1 argues that social variables help her distinguish between the two since *"... when I'm at the office, people start leaving around 5, making it a natural thing to pack up and end the day. But when I am working from home there is no clear line between work and my other life. It becomes more difficult to distinguish when work ends, and personal life begins"*.

Speaking of the social implications, one of the most notable themes seen in the results is the way remote work impacts individuals' need for social interactions. Respondent 8 argues *"... it is not the same to work remotely. You lose the social aspects causing poorer communication and worse sharing of knowledge. [...] I feel exhausted working remotely due to this and it affects my will to do things outside of work"*. While all our respondents seem to struggle with the social bits when working remotely, a majority claim they work more efficiently remotely. Our results show that our respondents take significantly fewer breaks, have shorter lunches, and are not as easily disturbed by informal interactions and noise when working at their preferred location compared to the office. The increase in efficiency does, however, come with a cost. Respondent 1 says that remote work *"... is less socially*

interactive and could cause one to feel more alone over extended periods of time, leading to worsened mental health". This view of feeling lonely is widely shared among our respondents and despite the existence of digital forms of communication, it is usually not enough to stimulate their need for authentic interactions. While some believe digital meetings are good because they are more effective and direct, they all agree that physical meetings are significantly better for stimulating their need for social interaction. In fact, several respondents argue that digital meetings negatively impact their image of themselves, and females in particular appear to be influenced to a larger extent. Respondent 6 says that *"I become much more self-aware when I constantly see myself on the screen and I tend to adjust my hair or clothes all the time. [...] It is not normal and can be tough on people who already struggle with their self-image"*. Respondent 1 elaborates on the issue, saying *"When you are expected to sit 8 hours in front of your screen and have digital meetings, you become very mentally aware of your own appearance. I don't think it is healthy and it has been really tough for me to cope with it"*.

Another challenge identified with remote work is the tendency to underutilise sick days even though they are not feeling well. This means that most young professionals, due to the possibility to work from home, perform their work tasks even though they are not in optimal health. For instance, Respondent 1 highlights the problem of knowing when taking a sick day is justified, given the blurred lines of spaces reserved for work and personal life. She expresses her uncertainty, saying that *"...maybe I'm too sick to be at the office, but am I too sick to open my laptop on my couch? I think that line is super difficult"*. Respondent 2 expands on this problem saying that *"... the distance to call in sick becomes really long when you work from home"*. The elusiveness of physical workspaces creates an expectation from the employer that one should work unless they are severely sick, or as Respondent 2 puts it, *"unless I am deadly sick"*.

The remote workplace is, however, an enabler in many other ways. As highlighted by Respondent 7, having the support from her employer to live abroad during the summer months allows her to strike a superior balance between the different spheres of life. This arrangement empowers her to pursue her personal interests in a location she deems appropriate, leading to her feeling increasingly satisfied and fulfilled. Respondent 5 also expresses that remote work can be a facilitator to her overall satisfaction, saying that *"my flexibility to work anywhere allows for a changing environment, which gives me a very stimulating workplace"*. However, while the changing workplace can be stimulating, it is important to acknowledge the prevalence of inadequate work setups outside of the office. For instance, Respondent 6 raises the concern that subpar working equipment such as the lack of multiple screens, can hinder productivity resulting in more time being necessary to complete tasks and therefore increasing the workload. Furthermore, Respondent 6 highlights that when work is performed in non-traditional settings such as homes, cafes, or trains it may take a physical toll on a person's health since the places are not designed with ergonomics in mind.

5.1.2 Flexible working hours

While most of our respondents view flexible working hours as something positive facilitating a balance between work and personal life, others find that it aggravates it. Our results reveal an intriguing theme where moderate flexibility in determining your working hours are positive for the harmonisation of work and personal life, but that 'too much' freedom instead leads to challenges. Respondent 7 expresses that being able to begin or end work 1-2 hours earlier or later helps accommodate her personal interests outside of work, stating that *"I enjoy being able to influence my working hours depending on my general mood or what I have planned outside of work"*. However, as aforementioned, with less

structure follows more difficulties. Respondent 5 elaborates on it by claiming that flexible hours complicate her ability to strike a balance, stating, *"Work never ends, there is always more you can do when you do not have fixed hours"*. Respondent 4 nuances this statement by saying that *"It is both the best and worst thing about my job. I can set my own agenda but oftentimes I have to be available in the evenings or at weekends to adhere to my client's needs. [...] When your salary is fully determined by performance, you do not want to risk potentially missing a deal"*. He describes how having completely free hands to decide his schedule allows him to work out or run errands in the middle of the day, but that the challenge is to determine when work time ends, and personal time begins. Respondent 4 states *"It has happened several times that I have made personal plans that I cannot end up pursuing since something happens at work which I "have" to deal with. Because my compensation is based on commission, I feel like if I don't prioritise work in those situations, I might lose a deal and in turn get a worse salary"*.

5.2 Difficulty Setting Boundaries

The results showcase a consistent trend in which all our respondents think of work outside of designated working hours, further complicating their work-life balance. We found no data suggesting that the difficulties are influenced by gender. Respondent 6 expresses that she oftentimes finds herself reminiscing about work-related things outside of working hours, causing her to experience heightened stress levels. She also highlights the difficulties to disconnect mentally from work and that it affects her ability to *"... enjoy when actually being free from work.* Respondent 7 elaborates on the health topic suggesting that it affects her quality of sleep, stating that *"Sometimes I struggle to let go of things happening at work and I end up staying up late at night to dwell over it"*. Furthermore, the gathered results also reveal that some respondents even go as far as to avoid planning personal events in their free time during hectic times at work. Respondent 2 expresses that during the high season in his industry, his whole life turns into a loop solely containing work, resulting in him disregarding personal plans. He states that *"... some weeks I dream of work, wake up thinking about work, and then go to work. This is the point when you have to switch something in your routine, but it is hard"*. Our results suggest that boundaries, or more specifically the lack of boundaries, are focal challenges for young professionals to separate work and personal life.

Difficulties in setting boundaries concerning the role of personal influences in professional life further challenge people's ability to achieve a work-life balance. Respondent 4 raises concerns about the existence of personal relationships and their potential influence on work and other parts of life. He mentions that some of his closest friends have been clients of his and that it causes elevated levels of expectations to perform, stating that *"... when you know the client personally, you feel a greater responsibility to make a good deal since you do not want to disappoint your close friends"*. Respondent 4 continues by explaining that it not only increases pressure to perform but that it also eliminates certain boundaries necessary for separating work and personal life. He claims that work-related topics come up during private events causing him to struggle to distinguish when the person is a close friend or a client, saying *"It becomes hard to navigate and definitely makes it difficult to separate work from personal life"*.

Our data also underscore that boundaries can be difficult to set by yourself and that organisational incentives play a significant role in people's maintenance of a work-life balance. The results suggest that employers who engage in informal events and accommodate employees' preferences, tend to have employees with a better perceived work-life balance than those who do not. In other words, the organisation can either hinder

or facilitate the balance between work and personal life depending on how they support their preferences and the establishment of boundaries.

5.2.1 Work-related communication

Although the majority of our respondents had received a mobile phone from their employer, the results from our interviews show that people who have integrated work and private life into one phone find it more difficult to maintain work-life balance than people who have separate phones. Respondent 1 explains that disconnecting from work and being able to separate the work sphere from the life sphere becomes difficult, causing boundaries between the two to blur. Work-related communication mixes with personal communication. *"... I have everything on one phone, both work and private life, [...] communication can get mixed up, and there are no boundaries between work and life"* says Respondent 1. On the other hand, people who have chosen separate phones for work and personal life show that they can leave work devices at the office, thus more easily disconnecting from work and separating the two spheres. While some respondents argued that personal integrity was the main reason for having separate phones, others believe it improved their ability to disconnect from work. Respondent 2 elaborates on the simplification of disconnecting, stating that *"I have a separate work phone due to integrity reasons, but it is also nice to be able to either leave it at work or turn it off completely if I want to"*. Our results further show that prioritising also becomes more difficult despite having separate mobile devices. Respondent 5 expresses that *"I am more inclined to put away my private phone while working than putting away my work phone outside of work"*, showing that there is a tendency to prioritise work over life when faced with the option.

Additional data collected reveals an important aspect concerning the challenges of work-life balance: the pressure to be available and respond to work-related communication outside of hours designated for work. This pressure can manifest itself through various forms of communication, including emails, phone calls, or messaging platforms. Most of the respondents experience pressure coming externally from their supervisors, while others go as far as to say that the organisational culture expects it. Respondent 5 expands on the problem of the organisational expectation to constantly be reachable, stating that *"I am always expected to have my work phone with me and be available at all times, indifferent whether I am in Sweden or Greece. [...] This expectation causes increased levels of stress"*. Similar to this, Respondent 2 emphasises the fact that although his employer is not officially expecting him to be reachable outside of his contemporary working hours, the pressure of the organisational culture does. Nevertheless, while Respondent 2 does experience external pressure, he argues that the real pressure comes from himself and the fact that his current life situation allows him to be reachable 24/7. He says that *"I always want to perform, and one way to perform is to be available more than others. [...] I do not have anything else 'pulling' me like my colleagues who have kids and families, allowing me to be the first to check emails etc"*. Although setting boundaries is a challenge in itself, actually sticking to them is something many of our respondents also struggle with. Respondent 4 explains that even though people set boundaries, they tend to stretch them, stating *"If a customer calls you late outside of work one time and you answer, then it is very likely that they will do it again since you have shown that you are available and that your boundaries are pretty loose"*. Similarly, Respondent 5 says that *"If you start responding to job messages during inconvenient times, supervisors and clients will come to expect your availability at those times in the future as well"*. The quotes from Respondents 4 and 5 highlight a trend of compromising one's boundaries based on external pressure points.

5.2.2 Overtime pressure

Our results show that respondents who feel external pressure to be available from their employer also experience increasing difficulties maintaining a work-life balance. Respondent 1 communicates that she occasionally experiences pressure from her employer, stating *"... I am expected to work overtime when my superiors deem it necessary"*. However, while she does not necessarily see overtime itself as that big of a problem, she does feel like the uncertainty tied to it affects her personal life since she thinks it becomes difficult to plan ahead or you have to change plans last minute. Overtime expectations can, however, vary greatly depending on seasonality and levels of workload. Respondent 2, who during high seasons typically works 60-80 hours per week, elaborates on external pressure from supervisors, saying that *"I have been told by upper-level management that I have 8 hours during the evening that I could be working as well"*. While this pressure might be unique to the industry of Respondent 2's work, other respondents have experienced similar expectations during specific periods. Respondent 8, for instance, expresses his concerns about external overtime expectations, stating *"... when we release new features, there is pressure from my employer to be available in case there are any problems with the new feature. We are always expected to fix any problems the same day no matter what, that pressure can be very stressful"*. Overtime expectations can also stem from an individual's will to perform i.e., internal pressure. Respondent 2 explains that his motivation for overtime not only comes from the external pressure of his employer but that it also comes from a will to perform well and develop his professional abilities. He says, *"I have personal goals I want to achieve, which sometimes forces me to work overtime to ensure that I reach them"*.

5.3 Lack of Experience

Based on the collected data, it became evident that all the respondents have changed the factors that they initially valued in a job position. Prior to the start of their white-collar careers, the respondents' primary drivers were, apart from company culture, mainly extrinsic in the form of external recognition and monetary compensation. Respondent 7 highlights the importance of compensation as a motivator, stating that *"Obviously after 5 years of University studies you want to get a good salary"*, while Respondent 3 attunes that *"When entering work-life, you need to know your worth and expect to be paid accordingly"*. However, none of the respondents appeared to assign the same importance to extrinsic factors when we prompted them about their current factors to consider in a job. Instead, a majority today now assign greater value towards work-life balance, meaningful tasks, and flexible work conditions. Respondent 4 expands on this fundamental change in values, saying that *"I began my career wanting to make a name for myself in the industry. I worked hard and only had 2 weeks of vacation during my first 3 years. [...] Today I have re-evaluated a lot of things and want to prioritise other aspects of my life instead of working all the time"*. A similar shift in values can be seen by Respondent 8, stating that *"Now that I have worked for a while, I realised that social interactions and the ability to not bring work home more than necessary are even more crucial than before thought"*.

Moreover, the collected data also reveals an intriguing connection between experience and young professionals' ability to strike a balance between work and personal life. The data suggest that as people gain more experience, they become more prone to find harmony in the complex puzzle of work and life. Several of our respondents struggle in the early stages of their careers as the combination of internal and external pressures can be hard to navigate. Respondent 6 expresses that *"When I started my career, I worked a lot and had difficulties not thinking about work when I came home. Now that I have more professional experience, work-life balance is easier to achieve since I have learnt to set necessary boundaries"*. As

highlighted by Respondent 6, the results show that as people advance in their careers and accumulate professional maturity, they tend to acquire new values and skills necessary to achieve a better balance between work and personal life. They also tend to figure out what the subjective term work-life balance actually means to them, thus learning how to set boundaries and prioritise their needs to a larger extent. Respondent 1 says that work-life balance means *"... to not let work take over your whole life but instead have time over for friends, family, and hobbies"* and Respondent 8 claims that it means to have *"... stimulating work assignments and energy to do other things outside of working hours"*. There are minor differences between the subjective definitions of work-life balance among our respondents. However, they all appear to value personal relationships and the energy to do non-job-related things when they are free from work.

6. Discussion & Analysis

The upcoming chapter delves into the discussion and analysis of the results, provided in the previous chapter, by identifying patterns and connecting them to the literature. It is divided in the same way as the aggregated dimensions provided in the results and lies as a foundation for the upcoming conclusions.

6.1 Struggle Adapting to New Ways of Working

6.1.1 Remote work

According to our findings, we can see that working remotely presents both advantages and disadvantages for young professionals. One of the most apparent disadvantages is that remote work lacks the social interactions individuals normally acquire through working physically in an office, presenting difficulties in satisfying their social demands. This in turn can have a detrimental effect on mental health and create issues related to self-perception from constantly seeing yourself during online meetings. Our results largely confirm previous findings by Elbogen et al. (2022) suggesting that remote work makes it harder to make in-person social contacts, which exacerbates anxiety, social isolation, and emotional exhaustion. Something that our respondents have confirmed, stating that the lack of social interactions while working remotely can lead to an overall lack of energy, in turn creating a negative spiral of isolation. They further support the findings by Bertoni et al. (2022) and Nenasheva (2023) who both claimed that the enforcement of remote work increased the prevalence of depressive mental states, especially in young people. In addition, several of our respondents argued that the sharing of information becomes less efficient while working remotely, stating that face-to-face conversations and simply being in the office space facilitate sharing of information in a better way. The findings of Allen et al. (2015) suggest that knowledge sharing is built upon trust and that face-to-face conversation is the superior way to build relationships and trust. Connecting these findings to each other, one could argue that remote work impedes the trust-building process and therefore leads to lesser sharing of knowledge and information, which would be proven by our results.

Furthermore, while it has negative mental effects, many of our respondents claim to work more efficiently remotely due to the absence of social distractions. This resonates with the findings of Choudhury et al. (2020) who found that employee productivity increases when an individual gets to perform their tasks at their preferred location outside of work. Our respondents tend to take significantly fewer breaks, have shorter lunches, and are not as easily disturbed by informal interactions and noise when working at their preferred location. While these factors may increase productivity, it bridges the gap between spaces designated for work and personal life. As highlighted by Respondent 1, the social interactions that may be a distraction at times also simplify the distinction between the two since there exists a social pressure to pack up your things and leave when everyone else is leaving.

Our respondents experienced more difficulties in separating their work tasks from their personal tasks when working remotely than when they do not. The majority finds that the absence of the physical distinction between workspace and personal space makes it challenging to establish and maintain those boundaries. Conducting your work in the same space as you live, often not more than a couple of metres from your bed, naturally makes the separation harder. These results can be linked to the findings of Gajendran and Harrison (2007, p. 1527) who argue that remote work causes the work-life domains to interfere with one another. Furthermore, it is also found that remote work can increase the risk of causing work-family conflicts because *"... family or work encroaches on the other because they*

occupy the same place and, potentially, the same time" (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007, 1527). The lack of separation has also, for some respondents, resulted in difficulties in managing time and demands a high level of discipline from the individual.

Our results showcase that remote work presents health issues for our respondents. The results show that young professionals appear to not utilise their sick days when ill, causing them to compromise their physical health. The reason appears to be the elusiveness of physical places designated for work, and especially that remote work causes the lines to blur. This largely confirms previous research by Ferreira et al. (2022) claiming that sickness presenteeism is the new (ab)normal because of the rapid increase of remote work. In connection to what Arbetsmiljöverket (2021) deems to be an adequate work setup, we can see from our results that most of our respondents who work remotely experience that their work setup is ergonomically inadequate. They appear to work from the couch, on trains, and other non-traditional places which can be a physical constraint. In addition, respondents have also expressed that they have inadequate computer screens at home in comparison to the office setup, putting further constraints on working remotely.

6.1.2 Flexible hours

As previous research has shown (Alegre & Pasamar, 2017), organisational attention towards work-life balance has begun to increase as companies have seen the benefits that work-life balance gives back to the organisation. Organisations that implement policies which promote work-life balance experience an increase in employee satisfaction, resulting in lower turnover and high employee job commitment (Galinsky & Johnson, 1998). Organisations also become more attractive for employees who value work-life balance (Wasay, 2013), something that our respondents also confirm when explaining what they value in an employer.

Throughout our interviews, some of our respondents argued that support from their employer allowed them to work more flexible hours. Previous research (Iacovoiu, 2020) has shown that organisational support has a direct positive relationship with work-life balance. It is argued that an organisation which supports its employees try to understand their wants and needs, resulting in a better work-life balance for the employee. One respondent in particular, Respondent 7, said that she was able to work while being abroad and, thanks to her supportive manager, could combine the two and thus striking a better work-life balance. Another respondent, Respondent 8, said that his employer supported him by allowing some flexibility to working hours, explaining that he could come in to work one hour late or leave one hour early if needed. Both these respondents claimed that this enabled them to balance their life outside of work, proving what previous literature has argued. On the other hand, our results also suggest that too much flexibility can impose challenges and instead hinder work-life balance. These findings align with Shagvaliyeva and Yazdanifard (2014) who found that moderately flexible working hours can improve work-life balance, while extreme flexibility during non-traditional working hours was more associated with health issues. In relation to organisational support, if employees do not benefit from too much flexibility because it disrupts their life outside of work, the company should revise its policies.

6.2 Difficulty Setting Boundaries

While previous research has suggested that New Ways of Working (NWW) can contribute to females struggling more than males in setting boundaries to achieve a work-life balance due to traditionalization of gender roles making them both earners and homemakers (Chung & van der Lippe, 2020, p. 366; Houston, 2005; Lott & Chung, 2016; Syed & Özbilgin, 2019,

p. 330; Williams 2015, p. 17), our results show no significant differences between the perceived challenges between the genders. The reasons for our contradicting results may be many, but Chung and van der Lippe (2020, p. 366) suggest that national contexts may be one, causing us as researchers to believe that the gender equality situation in Sweden may be one possible explanation. While the situation is far from perfect, the European Institute for Gender Equality (2021) ranks Sweden as the best country in Europe for gender equality. The relatively good situation in Sweden may therefore put less emphasis on traditional gender norms and instead allows for a better division of opportunities and responsibilities. Contrarily, previous research's actuality ranges from 2005 to 2019 and has been conducted in countries with worse conditions for gender equality, which is why their results may be more distinct and differ from ours. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that our sample is relatively small and only focused on young professionals, whereas other research has investigated bigger and broader samples.

6.2.1 Work-related communication

Our results present an interesting notion on the use of technology, more specifically, mobile devices, showcasing that respondents that have integrated both work and personal communication into one phone experience difficulties disconnecting from work when not working. The reasons behind this are highly individual, however, the results coincide with the findings of Lester (1999) and Stephens et al. (2007) who argue that technology also can disrupt employee work-life balance. Similarly, Bhuvaneswari et al. (2022) showed that the increased use of technical solutions can make boundaries between work and personal life difficult to define. Several of our respondents have expressed that they struggle to disconnect because they find themselves constantly available, resulting in an overlap between work and personal life and ultimately no boundaries. On the other hand, it is evident that respondents who separated their work phone from their personal one showed a greater ability to disconnect from work. These findings corroborate previous research from Barber and Santuzzi (2017) showing that the physical separation of work and personal phone facilitates work-life balance. It shows that, although technological advancement has offered major improvements and can be beneficial for both employer and employee, if not properly implemented and managed it can have a deteriorating effect on employee work-life balance.

Demerouti et al. (2014) expands on what implications an increased use of technology, mainly smartphones, can have for employees. It is argued that using smartphones increases productivity, and employee responsiveness, and gives a greater amount of flexibility to the employee, thus companies view giving employees work phones as a *"return on investment"* (Demerouti et al., 2014, p. 125). Although it is perceived as mostly positive for the employees, our study shows conflicting results. Several respondents said that they easily risk experiencing information overload and that communication can be difficult to sift through, especially when using one mobile device for both work and personal communication. Derks and Bakker (2010) also found that the pressure to respond quickly is another factor which affects information overload among employees, something that our results confirm. Several of our respondents have expressed that their use of technology causes them to increase their availability and extend their working hours, leading to blurred boundaries between work and life.

Despite having already existing boundaries it may be hard to maintain them. Respondents 4 and 5 both explained that initial compromises of their own boundaries lead to future expectations of their availability. These results correlate with the finding of Ashforth et al. (2000) which showed that external expectations relating to availability were reinforced when individuals made initial compromises to their own boundaries. The same research also

shows that the cycle of constant availability impedes an individual's ability to maintain a work-life balance, supporting the findings of our interviews.

6.2.2 Overtime

As our results previously underscored, our respondents tend to experience both external and internal pressures regarding working overtime, complicating their ability to balance their personal and professional commitments. Since more overtime equals less free time, it forces young professionals to potentially sacrifice their own wants and needs in favour of working more hours. It in turn means that individuals spend less time on family, friends, or other activities that would help achieve work-life balance. Our findings align with previous research (Aryee et al., 2005; Vogel, 2012; Kumarasamy et al., 2015; Major et al., 2002) arguing that overtime, or 'work overload', severely hinders work-life balance and can have detrimental effects on the individual's overall health. Previous research (Vogel, 2012; Kumarasamy et al., 2015) has also shown that individuals who work large amounts of overtime over a longer period of time, like our respondents 2 and 4, are likely to become frustrated because of the lack of work-life balance. That same frustration can in turn lead to job dissatisfaction, lower productivity, and an overall lesser work-life balance.

Long hours and overtime also appear to reflect the belief that, to succeed in the corporate environment, one must demonstrate commitment in terms of hours spent at work – at least during the early years of a career (Coffey, 1994). This belief could be seen as confirmed by Respondent 2, who argued that being available and working overtime was one way to perform. However, this goes against Vogel (2012) who argues that working more than 40 hours per week does nothing to employee productivity, on the contrary, it decreases it. In addition to working longer hours, Sturges and Guest (2004, p. 18) showed that longer hours ultimately undermine the ability to achieve a work-life balance. From this, one could argue that working more overtime does not necessarily lead to further success for either work-life balance or professional performance.

Therefore, with our results, we can argue that the respondents who work an increased amount of overtime, over a longer period, indeed have a higher risk of experiencing both mental and physical discomfort. The external pressure of working overtime that our respondents experience has a direct effect on work-life balance. Spending more time at work can be both physically and mentally draining, implying that less time can be spent on activities outside of work. This paired with the uncertainty of not knowing when overtime might be needed, makes personal plans difficult or even impossible for some, resulting in further complicating the maintenance of a work-life balance.

6.3 Lack of Experience

Our findings align with those of Barna (2016), Kirchmayer and Fratičová (2018), and the European Labour Authority (2023) claiming that the factors young professionals value when they consider their current employment was mainly extrinsic in the form of personal recognition and monetary compensation. However, our findings further revealed a profound evolution in the mindset and priorities of young professionals as they advanced in their careers and gained professional maturity. While recognition and salaries once were seen as pivotal motivators, our results underscore that the experience has caused all of them to place a greater emphasis on work-life balance, social interactions, and flexible work arrangements that accommodate personal commitments. Our data therefore supports Kirchmayer and Fratičová (2018) who suggested that experience is an influential factor in an individual's motivational profile and that young professionals do not prioritise work-life balance as a particularly important factor when choosing future employment due to its absence. The

profound shift in work values, instead, resembles those of older generations, specifically Millennials, as highlighted by Zemke (2000, cited in Cennan & Gardner, 2008). It might not come as a surprise that values change over time. In fact, Cennamo and Gardner (2008, p. 892) highlighted that work values change with experience, age, and life stages. However, the rapid re-evaluation of work values is quite remarkable since the respondents changed their values in less than 1 year and up to 3.5 years. As this generation commonly obtains significantly less prior work experience than previous generations (Fry & Parker, 2018; Sladek & Grabinger, 2014), their rapid change in values might be a result of inadequate experience.

On the topic of experience, the findings from our collected data showcased that as our respondents accumulated experience, they found it gradually easier to balance the spheres of work and personal life. This is not only because the subjective meaning of work-life balance becomes clear with time, but also because they develop the necessary skills and abilities to set boundaries, facilitating work-life balance. Our results contradict those of Darcy et al. (2012) and Walia (2015) whose findings indicate that there exists no correlation between experience and the ability to strike a balance between work and personal life. Our results further oppose the results of (Chitra & Sheela, 2013) claiming that young people have it easier to find a work-life balance. Our results do, however, largely confirm the findings of Richert-Kaźmierska and Stankiewicz (2016) who based their study on collected data from Sweden, Finland, and Lithuania and found statistically significant evidence that young people struggle more with maintaining work-life balance than people with more experience. It also aligns with Nenasheva (2023) who showcased that the struggles of remote work may be age-related since the negative mental effects are more present among the young population than the older. Important to consider is also that societal and cultural expectations play an inherently different role depending on the locality of the study. Our results happen to align with the only two studies that incorporate data from Sweden and culturally adjacent countries, suggesting that the cultural and societal factors may be contributing factors to explain the age disparities.

7. Ending Discussion

This chapter will address the research question and answer it based on the findings, previous literature and purpose stated at the beginning of the paper. In addition, this chapter will present both theoretically and practically how the conclusions can contribute to the currently available body of literature, as well as societal implications. Lastly, it will provide recommendations for future research in the field of work-life balance.

7.1 Conclusions

The theoretical framework paired with the collected data fulfils the purpose of the study, allowing us to successfully answer the research question:

- *What are the challenges for young professionals in achieving work-life balance?*

Our study finds that young professionals face several challenges in achieving a work-life balance. The lack of social interaction is, according to our respondents, the most pressing challenge since it has a strong impact on their mental and physical health. Second, setting and maintaining boundaries is critical to ensure the successful separation of work and personal life and minimise conflict. Boundaries are challenged by both external and internal pressure points, causing the boundaries to blur between the two. Lastly, we can conclude that lack of experience is an influential factor impacting young professionals' motivational profile, something that tends to change once they accumulate professional maturity. Gaining experience also makes it gradually easier to achieve a work-life balance due to a value change and the development of the necessary skills and abilities to set boundaries.

Albeit, at times, having conflicting responses from our respondents, we feel confident drawing these conclusions based on the collected data related to the theory. While many of our concluding remarks confirm already existing research, we contribute with a valuable focus towards young professionals in a Swedish context.

7.1.1 Lack of social interaction induced by New Ways of Working worsens mental and physical health outcomes

After analysing the data collected from our interviews and contrasting it with the currently available literature presented in the theoretical framework, we can conclude that the lack of social interaction is the biggest challenge for young professionals. Working remotely over extensive periods of time causes people to feel lonely and induces depressive mental states since they crave authentic social interactions. This in turn further leads to physical exhaustion that negatively impacts people's tendency to utilise their free time to engage in both socially and physically stimulating activities, which further hinders young professionals to achieve work-life balance.

7.1.2 External and internal pressure blur the boundaries that separate work from personal life

A second conclusion that we can draw from our analysis is that once the boundaries between work life and personal life become blurred, young professionals experience major difficulties in achieving work-life balance. The difficulties originate in both external pressure from employers demanding overtime, and internal pressure from the individual itself related to availability and an individual's own level of ambition. These two main

pressure points cause the blurring of boundaries, which negatively affects young professionals' ability to achieve work-life balance.

7.1.3 Lack of professional experience causes young professionals to struggle to achieve work-life balance

Lastly, the final conclusion drawn from the analysis indicates that extrinsic factors such as recognition and compensation were initially valued by our respondents. However, as they gain professional experience and evolve in their career, work-life balance in combination with flexible work and social interactions is emphasised more. This argues that work values, therefore change over time in relation to accumulated work experience. Not only do their perception and priorities change, but we can also conclude that when young professionals accumulate experience, they develop the necessary skills to distinguish their personal life from their professional life and thereby achieve a work-life balance.

7.2 Theoretical contributions

This study aimed at investigating and identifying what challenges there are for young professionals to maintain a work-life balance in a Swedish context. These challenges were identified through semi-structured interviews and later analysed. In addition to previous studies on work-life balance, literature, and theories on new ways of working and young professionals were also considered. From our qualitative data, we could then connect it to chosen theory and relevant literature, enabling us to draw conclusions between theory and reality. Our study contributes to the ongoing discussion on early career adults' ability to find work-life balance with the growing adaptation of New Ways of Working.

We argue that the study has been completed in accordance with the purpose of the study and answered the stated research question. Despite the relatively small sample for our study, we have identified significant challenges for young professionals in relation to work-life balance. It is our ambition that the findings and conclusions in this thesis will further contribute to an increased understanding and attention to the topic of work-life balance. We also hope that future researchers can expand on present work-life balance theories, in addition to developing new ones.

7.3 Practical contributions

We believe that our study can prove to be beneficial for both employers, existing employees, as well as future employees. While conducting the interviews, it quickly became clear that many of our respondents had never considered their own work-life balance situation even though they could elaborate on the term and its meaning. Through our study, we hope to raise further awareness on the subject and highlight the importance of work-life balance, especially for young professionals. Although our study is targeted towards young professionals, the notion of work-life balance transcends all ages and industries, thus not limiting its practical contribution to our specific sample.

This thesis highlights the importance for organisations to address mental health issues in the workplace. Our results confirm previous research in the sense that remote work decreases authentic social interactions necessary for stimulating young professionals' needs. By understanding both sides of the work-life balance spectrum, employers can gain a deeper understanding of the challenges that their employees face and accommodate their needs. Companies can make necessary alterations in company policies which promote work-life balance, resulting in a win-win situation where both the employees and employer benefit from work-life balance. Regulators could also benefit from our study as it indicates how

employees respond to work-life balance and, equally importantly, work-life imbalance. Regulators should aim at being proactive, ensuring that laws and regulations are modernised and up to date to support both employers and employees.

7.4 Societal implications

Connecting back to the purpose of the study, which was to investigate what the main challenges are for young professionals to strike a balance between their personal and professional life, there are several societal implications of this study.

Firstly, large bodies of existing work-life balance research have been situated on the concerns for conventional families, where marriage and parenting commonly are the focus (Schultz et al., 2012, p. 45). Our research is instead focused on young professionals and their inherently different situation commonly without the same family responsibilities. This contributes to the further understanding of the diversity among different groups of our society.

Secondly, this study has highlighted the complex relationship that young professionals today have with New Ways of Working and technology which affects their ability to set boundaries and achieve work-life balance. From this, we hope that a dialogue can be opened between employers, regulators, researchers, and employees that leads to a better understanding of the issue and what potential solutions there are to those issues. Secondly, this study recognises the impact that technology and flexible working arrangements have on young professionals. Investigating this further can help shape the modern work environment of tomorrow, leading to more well-informed decision-making from all parties involved. Lastly, our study also shows the potential consequences of experiencing a work-life imbalance in terms of mental and physical health. This study helps in raising awareness about issues in the workplace, as well as outside of the workplace, promoting the need for well-thought-out support systems that could help battle these issues.

7.5 Future research

The limitations of this research project open up suggestions for future research. This project has solely examined young professionals' challenges in achieving work-life balance in the Swedish labour market with a focus on New Ways of Working. We believe that future research could include more respondents and span over a larger number of industries to allow the study to gain a wider insight into the challenges of work-life balance. Furthermore, the study’s timeframe could be extended to monitor the evolution of people's work-life balance over a longer period of time. Here, other variables such as job satisfaction and career progression could be incorporated to gain a more comprehensive view of the situation. This would be interesting since our study has suggested that the values of young professionals change as they gain experience and that their ability to strike a balance between work and personal life becomes easier with the acquisition of professional maturity.

This research project adopted an employee perspective by interviewing young professionals and their challenges to work-life balance. However, another perspective would be to see it from the organisation’s point of view by interviewing HR managers or similar on how they work with flexible work arrangements and the accommodation of young professionals’ quest for work-life balance. This would provide a holistic perspective to the current body of research and nuance the potential role conflict between employees and employers.

Moreover, we believe that most employers around the world wish that their employees find a healthy work-life balance. However, companies operate differently all around the world due to societal and cultural factors. Unfortunately, we have not encountered any significant number of scientific studies investigating international differences. A larger study would potentially be able to incorporate different geographical contexts, age groups, and employment types to try and cross-examine the results to gain a more nuanced overview of the complexity of maintaining a work-life balance in a digitised world.

Lastly, the rise of new work arrangements such as digital nomads or the gig economy also areas which needs further research. These somewhat recent phenomenon are leveraging the pros and the cons of New Ways of Working to the extreme, and may therefore face additional challenges towards work-life balance that previously have not been thoroughly examined.

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Appendix

Appendix 1: *Initial keyword searches and the number of results in Google Scholar*

Keyword	**Search results**
Young Professionals	3 250 000
Work-life balance	6 150 000
New ways of working	8 790 000
Generation Z	7 040 000
Work-life balance and remote work	3 960 000
Gen Z work-life balance	2 140 000
Gen Z characteristics	6 310 000
Covid 19 New Ways of Working	5 170 000

Appendix 2: *Interview guide in Swedish*

Del 1 - Bakgrundsinformation

1. Kan du berätta lite om dig själv och din nuvarande jobbsituation?

Del 2 - Frågor kopplade till work-life balance

2. Vilka var nyckelfaktorerna när du sökte din nuvarande tjänst?
    1. Har de ändrats något till idag och vad du värdesätter?

3. Hur skulle du beskriva work-life balance, vad betyder det för just dig?

4. Skulle du säga att work-life balance är viktigt, både generellt och för dig specifikt?
    1. Om ja, varför då?
    2. Om nej, varför inte?

5. Om du skulle beskriva din egen situation, skulle du säga att du upplever work-life balance just nu?
    1. Hur då, varför/varför inte?

6. Har din arbetsgivare några policies som främjar work-life balance?
    1. Om ja, använder du dig av dem?

7. Om du fick ranka tre största utmaningar med att hålla en work-life balance, hur rankar du då?

Del 3 - Frågor kopplade till teknologi och arbetssätt

8. Hur känner du gentemot användandet av teknik (mobiler, datorer, etc) på jobbet?

9. Hur hanterar du eventuella distraktioner som kan komma från teknik, såsom notiser från sociala medier med mera?

10. Har du någon gång känt press över att konstant vara tillgänglig eller kunna svara på jobb-relaterad kommunikation?
    1. Varför har du känt denna pressen, vart kommer den ifrån?

11. Finns det några specifika fall där tekniken har påverkat din förmåga att koppla bort dig själv från jobbet, utanför de vanliga jobbtimmarna?

12. Har du någon gång använt teknik för att hjälpa dig med att hantera work-life balance?
    1. Hur har du gjort det, på vilket sätt?

13. Hur upplever du onlinemöten kontra fysiska möten?
    1. Påverkar det dig att se dig själv i skärmen ständigt?

14. Hur tror du att ökandet av distansjobb och online kommunikation, som teams, zoom etc, har påverkat work-life balance av unga professionella?
    1. Finns det några för- samt nackdelar som du har upplevt?

15. Påverkar flexibla arbetssätt din benägenhet att sjukanmäla dig?

16. Enligt dig, vad kan arbetsgivare göra för att hjälpa sina anställda att koppla bort jobbet?

17. Har du någonsin satt gränser med din arbetsgivare eller medarbetare gällande användandet av teknik utanför jobbets normala timmar?
    1. Om ja, hur gick du tillväga med den konversationen?

18. Tycker du att arbetsgivare har ett ansvar när det kommer till att introducera teknik på arbetsplatsen?

Appendix 3: *Interview guide in English*

Part 1 - Background information

1. Can you tell us a bit about yourself and your current work situation?

Part 2 - Questions related to work-life balance

2. What are the key factors that you considered when applying for your current job?
    1. Do they differ from what you value today?

3. How would you describe work-life balance, what does it mean for you?

4. Would you say that work-life balance is important, both in general and to you specifically?
    1. If yes, why is it important?
    2. If no, why not?

5. If you were to describe your own situation, would you say that you experience work-life balance?
    1. In what way, why not?

6. Does your employer have any work-life balance policies?
    1. If yes, do you use them?

7. If you were to rank the three biggest challenges with maintaining work-life balance, how would you rank them?

Part 3 - Questions related to technology and ways of working

8. How do you feel about the use of technology (mobile devices etc.) in the workplace?

9. How do you manage the potential distractions of technology while you are working, such as social media notifications or instant messages?

10. Have you ever felt pressure to be constantly available or responsive to work-related communication?
    1. Why have you felt this pressure, where does it come from?

11. What are some specific ways that technology has impacted your ability to disconnect from work outside of regular business hours?

12. Have you ever used technology to help you manage your work-life balance?
    1. How have you used it, in what way?

13. How do you experience online meetings versus physical meetings?
    1. Does it affect you to constantly see yourself on the screen?

14. How do you think that the rise of remote work and virtual communication tools have impacted work-life balance for young professionals?

    1. Are there any benefits or drawbacks that you have experienced?

15. Does flexible ways of working affect your tendency to call in sick?

16. In your opinion, what can employers do to help their employees disconnect from work?

17. Have you ever had to set boundaries with your employer or co-workers around your use of technology outside of regular business hours?
    1. If so, how did you approach this conversation?

18. Do you think that employers have a responsibility when introducing technological tools?

Appendix 4: *Consent form for interview participants*

Information about participation in a student thesis

We are Marcus Moore and Hugo Ljungkvist and are students at Umeå University with the purpose to investigate The Challenges of Achieving Work-Life Balance in the Digital Age.

We conduct interviews with 8 people within different white collar working segments and age groups. The material will be compiled and presented in a thesis published in Diva https://umu.diva-portal.org

It is completely voluntary to participate. You can choose not to join anymore at any time, and you do not have to say why.

If you want to get in touch with us, you can do at hulj0002@umu.se or mamo0203@umu.se

Consent to process personal data

Prior to the thesis work at the department for Business Administration, Umeå School of Business, Economics and Statistics the following personal information about you will be collected and processed.

Your consent is required for personal data to be processed. Umeå University is responsible for the processing of personal data. Contact information for Umeå University is: Umeå University, 901 87 Umeå, registrator@umu.se, 090-786 50 00. Umeå University has appointed a data protection officer. The Data Protection Officer can be reached at pulo@umu.se or by calling 090-786 50 00.

Your personal data will, with the support of the consent, be processed at the latest until the time when the student work has been approved.

Your personal information will only be handled by authorised students and authorised staff at Umeå University.

You have the right to withdraw your consent at any time. You do this by contacting our supervisor: Virginie Fernandez / Virginie.fernandez@umu.se. Please note, however, that a revocation of your consent does not affect the legality of the processing before the consent is revoked.

You also have the right to contact Umeå University to obtain information about what information is processed about you or to request the correction, transfer, deletion, or limitation of your personal information. You can also contact the university's data protection

officer by emailing pulo@umu.se. For more information on how the university processes personal data, see: umu.se/gdpr

You also have the right to lodge a complaint with the supervisory authority, the Swedish Privacy Protection Authority, if you think that we process your personal data incorrectly.

Do you agree to the use of your personal data in the manner described above?

Yes ☐ Date: Name:

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