Staying emotionally connected while being physically apart – exploring what teleworkers need to stay committed and how internal communication can contribute

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Abstract

Purpose – Since research has already shown that social distance affects the relationship between employees and the organization, this study (1) examines job-related resources that contribute to teleworkers' organizational commitment and (2) works out how internal communication professionals can strategically address them.

Design/methodology/approach – A total of 50 problem-centered, semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with teleworkers from Austrian and German organizations between March and June 2021.

Findings – The interview data resulted in eight job-related resources that contribute to teleworkers' organizational commitment. By pointing out the communicative aspects of these resources, we discuss how internal communication professionals can strategically engage to maintain the connection between teleworkers and the organization despite the distance. It highlights the communicators' role as a strategic communicators and networkers, as enabler and as key speaker for employees' needs.

Research limitations/implications – The data were collected during a health crisis (COVID-19 pandemic) in the context of Austrian and German organizations and refers to the perspective of employees for whom teleworking israther new.

Originality/value – The study provides in-depth insights into teleworkers' expectations and entails clear implications for the practice of internal communication professionals to strengthen teleworkers' commitment.

Keywords Telework, Employees, Organizational commitment, Internal communication, Interview study

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

With the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, most organizations around the world made telework mandatory wherever practicable. Characteristics of this type of work are "the use of information and communications technologies (ICTs), such as smartphones, tablets, laptops, and desktop computers, for work that is performed outside the employer's premises" (ILO, 2021, p. 2) and very limited face-to-face interactions with other organizational members (Allen *et al.*, 2015). While working remotely from other locations than the employer's premises used to be possible predominantly for high earners or knowledge-workers, the pandemic

has made it the new normal (Wang *et al.*, 2021) and it is expected to persist in the long run (Kniffin *et al.*, 2021). As a result, the focus in research and practice is shifting from "whether or not to implement remote working" to "how to get the most out" it (Wang *et al.*, 2021, p. 18). In addition to the known advantages (e.g. Ipsen *et al.*, 2021; Kotera and Correa Vione, 2020), the interest lies in particular on the challenges faced by teleworkers (e.g. Kniffin *et al.*, 2021): blurring of work–life boundaries, ineffective communication, procrastination or perceived workplace loneliness that impacts employee well-being and performance (e.g. Wang *et al.*, 2021; also see Ipsen *et al.*, 2021).

From an employee's perspective, the shift towards teleworking creates a distance to the employing organization and hampers valuable private and work-related social connections and interactions. From an organizational point of view, this prompts the questions of how this affects employees' organizational commitment, i.e. their emotional attachment to and identification with an organization (Meyer and Allen, 1991) and their "willingness to promote and act in the interests of the organization" in a consistent manner (Jacobs, 2008, p. 48). Initial findings indicate that feeling disconnected from others has a negative impact on teleworkers commitment (Wang *et al.*, 2020). Also, independent of the specific teleworking arrangement, there is a negative effect of perceived workplace loneliness on employees' commitment (Mazzei *et al.*, 2023; Ozcelik and Barsade, 2018). Given the significance of organizational commitment for the organization and also for the individual (e.g. Meyer *et al.*, 2002; Walden and Kingsley Westerman, 2018), the first aim of this study is to find out about relevant job-related resources that foster teleworkers' organizational commitment.

As a key player for shaping relationships at work (Men, 2021), internal communication professionals are responsible for providing and addressing job-related resources that strengthen employees' connection to the organization (Walden, 2020). Extant research points to the positive effect of internal communication on employees' commitment (e.g. Allen, 1992; Holzwarth *et al.*, 2021; Lee and Kim, 2022; Postmes *et al.*, 2001; Walden and Kingsley Westerman, 2018) while arguing for employees' dependence on well-developed organizational communication in a telework setting (Jacobs, 2008). What is missing though is a clarification of how internal communication professionals can contribute to strategically maintaining and strengthening organizational commitment of teleworkers. Therefore, the second objective of this study is to identify the communicative aspects of the resources and to reflect ways in which internal communication professionals can address them and fulfill their role as "facilitators, trainers, relationship managers, motivators, but also experience designers in the organization" (Men, 2021, p. 7).

Through a social exchange perspective (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005) and building on assumptions of the job-demands resources theory (Bakker *et al.*, 2023; Demerouti *et al.*, 2001), this study contributes to the academic debate on how to strengthen organizational commitment (e.g. Jacobs, 2008; Meyer and Allen, 1991, 1997). Specifically, social exchange theorists argue that good relationships are based on reciprocity where different resources are exchanged. Satisfaction with workplace relationships depends on how the expectations of interaction partners are met (Blau, 1964). Knowledge about teleworkers' needs and expectations regarding their job-related resources can therefore provide valuable insights for those responsible for internal communication on how they can help to provide such resources by means of internal communication to consequently strengthen teleworkers' organizational commitment (e.g. Walden, 2021; Walden *et al.*, 2017; Walden and Kingsley Westerman, 2018).

The paper begins by elaborating organizational commitment and gives theoretical and empirical insights into why and how organizations should strive to strengthen it. The empirical part of the paper presents the research design and the findings of a qualitative interview study among 50 people employed in different organizations in Austria and Germany, who worked remotely at least 50% of their work time. After a discussion, the paper concludes with limitations and a brief outlook to future research.

Employees' organizational commitment

"When we say that someone is committed, we usually imply or state specifically that he or she is committed to something (e.g. he is committed to his family; she is committed to the project)" (Meyer and Allen, 1997, p. 16). In an organizational context, commitment is a psychological state that refers to the relationship of an employee to the employing organization (Meyer and Allen, 1991, 1997). Research has differentiated two main foci of commitment: first, to the organization as a whole and to its top management; second, to one's team, coworkers and managers. Subsequently, a distinction can be made between organizational commitment on the one hand and supervisor or team commitment on the other, although the different forms are not totally independent of each other (Holzwarth *et al.*, 2021). This study focuses on organizational commitment, as it falls within the remit of those working in the internal communication department (Men, 2021).

In the late 1970s, commitment was defined as "the relative strength of an individual's identification with and involvement in a particular organization" (Mowday *et al.*, 1979, p. 226) and characterized by "(1) a strong belief in and acceptance of the organization's goals and values; (2) a willingness to exert considerable effort on behalf of the organization; and (3) a strong desire to maintain membership in the organization" (Mowday *et al.*, 1979, p. 226). Meyer and Allen (1991) developed this understanding further and defined organizational commitment as a "psychological state that (1) characterizes the employee's relationship with the organization, and (2) has implications for the decision to continue membership in the organization" (p. 67). Conceptualized as a multidimensional relational construct (Meyer and Allen, 1997; for an overview of different frameworks see Mercurio, 2015) they distinguished between affective, continuance, and normative commitment, which are associated with different motivations for an employee's decision to remain part of the organization (Meyer and Allen, 1991). *Affective commitment* is the emotional attachment to and identification with the organization. Affectively committed employees *want* to be members of their organization. The construct reflects an employee's attitudes and primary feelings about the employing organization and is often central to the academic debate and research (see Mercurio, 2015). If an employee's relationship with their employer is based primarily on *continuance commitment*, employees' focus is on the cost of leaving the company and the *need* to stay. *Normative commitment* refers to the individual's *obligation* to continue the employment in this specific organization (Meyer and Allen, 1991). As Meyer and Allen (1997) summarize, employees develop all forms of commitments retrospectively ("as a justification for an ongoing course of action", p. 10) and prospectively ("based on perceptions of current or future conditions of work within an organization", p. 10).

In public relations research, commitment is often conceptualized as part of the larger construct employee-organization relationship, defined as "the degree to which an organization and its employees trust one another, agree on who has the rightful power to influence, experience satisfaction with each other, and commit oneself to the other" (Men and Stacks, 2014, p. 307). The focus here lies on evaluating connectedness in both directions including when the organization aims to maintain a long-term commitment with its employees (Men and Stacks, 2014). Organizational commitment, however, is a psychological construct of its own right that focuses very specifically on employees' personal emotional connection to the organization in a rather one-directional way. The construct is operationalized using eight indicators (Meyer and Allen, 1991) to gauge, for example, employees' sense of belongingness to the organization, their emotional attachment to the organization, their willingness to remain with the organization, and their feeling that the organization's problems are their own problems. It is about how an employee actually feels about and identifies with the organization, which has implications for his or her membership and active behavior.

Jacobs (2008) conducted a seminal qualitative interview study with teleworking engineers, highlighting the bivalent definitions of organizational commitment for a remote work environment. Employees' relationship models are based on personal and situational factors, including past experiences, self-image and immediate needs. Those relationship models suggest how employees' relationships with the organization should be enacted. Commitment to an organization therefore involves first, "acting in the organisation's interests", and second, "a predisposition to such behaviour as a consistent pattern (rather than as one-off ad hoc decisions)" (Jacobs, 2008, p. 47). To just remain with an organization, as conceptualized by Meyer and Allen (1991), was more broadly defined by the interviewees as "a function of work preferences, immediate personal relationships, ambition and convenience" (Jacobs, 2008, p. 47) rather than as an expression of commitment. Commitment "emerges as particularly significant in remote work environments, in which evidence of the one does not appear necessarily to constitute evidence of the other" (Jacobs, 2008, p. 47). Thus, according to Jacobs, being committed to an organization also includes supportive behavior for the organization, which is often considered a consequence of commitment.

The three-component model (Meyer and Allen, 1991) inspired scholars to examine potential outcomes of affective commitment in particular. A meta-analysis by Meyer *et al.* (2002) substantiates that affective commitment is negatively related to employee turnover and positively related to job performance (Riketta, 2002), inter-organizational knowledge sharing (Matzler *et al.*, 2011), attendance, and importantly, to organizational citizenship behaviors that go beyond employees' formal job role (Walden and Kingsley Westerman, 2018). During a crisis situation like the COVID-19 pandemic, commitment fosters job engagement (e.g. Einwiller *et al.*, 2021). Importantly, being committed to an organization has positive aspects for employees themselves. Researchers point to its effects on employee well-being as it helps to better cope with different stressors (Meyer and Maltin, 2010). Furthermore, it strengthens employees job satisfaction and reduces work-family conflicts (e.g. Meyer *et al.*, 2002).

Organizational resources to foster employees' commitment

In terms of these positive outcomes, the academic debate is driven by the various considerations of how to stimulate, increase, and sustain employees' commitment. Here, research has a long tradition in explaining workplace relationships through the social exchange perspective (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005). "Social exchange comprises actions contingent on the rewarding reactions of others, which over time provide for mutually and rewarding transactions and relationships" (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005, p. 890). For an organizational context, Saks (2006) emphasizes that employees are more likely to be engaged and show additional role behavior when sufficient resources are provided for them. One of the basic tenets of social exchange theory is that mutual exchange of different kinds of resources results in "trusting, loyal, and mutual commitments" (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005, p. 875). Therefore, knowledge about general and particular expectations in terms of resources are necessary. General expectations are governed by social standards, previous experiences, and prevailing values that someone develops regardless of the source. Particular expectations, again, are formulated with regard to specific interaction partners, their behavior, and concrete resources (Blau, 1964). Based on these theoretical considerations, the antecedents of employees' commitment are seen as *job-related resources* that can be provided by an organization (Demerouti *et al.*, 2001).

Job demand resources (J-DR) theory (e.g. Bakker *et al.*, 2023; Demerouti *et al.*, 2001) further explains that specific job-related resources increase employees' health and foster motivational processes. The corresponding model proposes that certain work characteristics – job demands and job resources – are responsible for work-related

outcomes, such as commitment, engagement, or work performance. Job demands refer to psychological, physical, social, and organizational aspects of a job that imply efforts and therefore have certain physical or psychological costs. Job resources are psychological, physical, social, and organizational aspects of a job that help to achieve work goals, regulate job demands, contribute to learning and personal growth (Bakker *et al.*, 2023; Demerouti *et al.*, 2001). Some resources are more generic, others are very unique for a profession (see Bakker *et al.*, 2023).

Scholars highlight different generic job-related resources that contribute to employees' commitment, such as the critical role of managerial and organizational support (Allen, 1992; Rhoades and Eisenberger, 2002; Mazzei *et al.*, 2023), the influence of participation and appreciation (e.g. Einwiller *et al.*, 2021), and specific human resource practices such as an effective onboarding-process (e.g. Cohen and Veled-Hecht, 2010; Mercurio, 2015). The importance of strengthening commitment in a teleworking arrangement has been examined by Jacobs (2008). Jacobs identified several practices that can be considered as job-related resources and potentially contribute to teleworkers' commitment: rewarding employees learning process, giving feedback, fostering participation, exchanging knowledge, providing organizational support, and facilitating contact with customers and suppliers. Yet, since Jacobs' study, telework developed in various ways. Influential for changes was primarily the COVID-19 pandemic which made teleworking a much more widespread phenomenon, also for employees who would have not been allowed to work remotely prior to the pandemic (Wang *et al.*, 2021). This also led to new regulations and expectations by employees regarding possibilities and practices of teleworking (Eurofund, 2022). Against the background of these changes we examine what job-related resources teleworkers need to develop and maintain their organizational commitment:

RQ1. What job-related resources contribute to teleworkers' organizational commitment?

Organizational commitment from an internal communication perspective
Besides the CEO, managers, and coworkers, internal communication professionals seize a role and responsibility to strengthen employees' commitment (e.g. Men, 2021; Walden *et al.*, 2017). In this study, we specifically examine how internal communication professionals, who are regularly concerned with the strategic management of communication to build relationships in and with the organization (Men and Bowen, 2017, p. 12), can contribute. Steenkamp and Dhanesh (2023) aptly emphasize how important internal communication is for employees' perception of the overall work climate and their commitment when working remotely. Important for this study, communication is mentioned to be a specific job-related resource and many job-related resources have a communicative aspect (Schaufeli, 2017).

Scholars found that vertical communication, i.e. communication along hierarchies from top organizational levels to employees and vice versa, proved to be a more robust predictor of organizational commitment than horizontal communication, i.e. communication among coworkers (Allen, 1992; Holzwarth *et al.*, 2021; Postmes *et al.*, 2001). "People's sense of belonging to the organization does not primarily depend on the quality of their informal and socio-emotional interactions with peers and proximate colleagues, but it is related more strongly to their appreciation of the management's communications" (Postmes *et al.*, 2001, p. 240). In support of these findings, Jacobs' (2006) study on teleworking engineers suggests that the perceived efforts of organizational management to communicate appropriately are key to employees' commitment, and not the availability of appropriate communication technology and the frequency of digital communication.

Carriére and Bourque (2009) emphasize the importance of employees' satisfaction with internal communication to maintain commitment. They conclude that organizations should have a clear understanding of expectations valuable the preferred communication practices. In this context, communication by key communicators is necessary to reduce employees' uncertainties and foster their sensemaking process through transparency. Employees need (1) strategic information about the organization's goals, financial situation, and development, (2) the possibilities to interact with the organization, (3) and the feeling that the organization acts responsively (e.g. Postmes *et al.*, 2001; Walden *et al.*, 2017). Various scholars support this by showing the positive impact of transparency perceptions on employees' commitment (e.g. Ecklebe and Löffler, 2021; Einwiller *et al.*, 2021). Furthermore, Lee and Kim (2022) highlight the positive influence of symmetrical internal communication – a relationship-oriented approach – on employees' affective commitment (also see Kang *et al.*, 2023; Kang and Sung, 2017). In addition, Einwiller *et al.* (2021) found appreciative organizational communication to be a strong predictor of employees' affective commitment during the COVID-19 pandemic as it addresses their emotional needs. These findings highlight the necessary strategic involvement of internal communication professionals (Men, 2021).

Important for this study, research on internal crisis communication during the COVID-19 pandemic showed that the resources needed by employees during a crisis can be addressed by two types of internal communication, informational and relational (Einwiller *et al.*, 2021). Informational communication, on the one hand, is about conveying information in order to foster employees' knowledge and understanding. This type of communication is usually more one-sided and thus less interactive (see Heide and Simonsson, 2019). Relational communication, on the other hand, aims at strengthening the employee-organization relationship (Einwiller *et al.*, 2021), which includes employees' organizational commitment to their organization and vice versa (Men and Stacks, 2014). Research shows that internal communication of the relational type is particularly influential in generating affective commitment in employees during a crisis situation (Einwiller *et al.*, 2021).

Therefore, it is important to find out how internal communication professionals can contribute as strategic communicators to provide teleworkers with the job-related resources they expect and need to strengthen their organizational commitment.

RQ2. How can job-related resources that contribute to teleworkers' organizational commitment be addressed by internal communication professionals?

Research design
To answer the research questions, a qualitative research approach was chosen to provide sufficient openness and opportunities for in-depth reflection on teleworkers' expectations (Flick *et al.*, 2004). The perspective of employees is captured by conducting a series of problem-centered semi-structured interviews (Witzel, 2000) with people employed in different organizations in Austria and Germany between March and June 2021, one year into the COVID-19 pandemic.

Sampling and interviewees
To select appropriate interviewees, we followed a convenience sampling approach (Clarke and Braun, 2013). For the recruitment process we used the personal network of interviewers, graduate students in communication science. Drawing on Garrett and Danziger (2007), telework can range from as little as 10%–100% working remotely. In our study, we decided to set a higher threshold, recruiting teleworkers who had spent at least half of their work time in a telework setting in the last six months. Sampling criteria were furthermore that people had not gained any long-time experience teleworking before the pandemic, and were employed in

an organization with a minimum of 250 employees. Larger organizations were chosen to make sure, or to at least increase the probability, that the organization had a unit responsible for internal communication. The final sample consisted of 50 interviewees with a wide range of professions working in different industry sectors (see Appendix for an overview).

Research instrument and interview process
The interview guide was developed based on previous findings on organizational commitment. It contained open, narrative-generating questions (Witzel, 2000) and was tested in two mock interviews. At the beginning, interviewees were asked to talk about their personal telework situation, including questions to encourage a reflection on advantages and challenges. They were then invited to talk about their personal work motivation and engagement, as well as their experiences with internal communication during the last months. The main part of the interview focused on participants' personal relationship with their employing organization and included questions to assess the current state and actions taken by the organization to maintain their commitment, questions about dialogue options, the opportunities to participate in organizational processes, and regarding perceptions of support and appreciation. In addition, interviewees were asked to make suggestions for improvement to reduce their possible feeling of disconnection.

Before data collection started, the study design was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). The interviews were conducted and recorded online via MS Teams or Zoom, which allowed great flexibility during the pandemic (e.g. Gray *et al.*, 2020).

Codebook development and qualitative content analysis
The audio material was transcribed and coded using MAXQDA22. The analysis followed the coding instructions by Kuckartz (2014). In a first step, the transcripts were read and prepared for coding by highlighting important terms and themes, marking incomprehensible passages, and breaks in content. Subsequently, we thematically coded the factors that related to employees' commitment in their teleworking arrangement. In a next step, new analytical codes were formed inductively, focusing on finding examples to define the role of internal communication professionals. This entire process was accompanied by writing memos for in-depth analysis. After sorting all codes, the material was coded again, and appropriate quotations were selected for the presentation of the findings. Interpretation of the material was conducted through periodical reflections.

Quality criteria
To assess the quality of this research and to make data production more transparent (see Flick, 2018), we specifically considered the broad discussion of qualitative standards (e.g. Clarke and Braun, 2013; Flick, 2018). By eliciting multiple perspectives from interviewees with various professions and working in different sectors, conclusions can be drawn based on a broad variety of experiences with telework while achieving theoretical saturation. In addition, special care was taken to allow an open research process accompanied by personal reflections on prior knowledge and experiences, interview situations, and findings. Besides, interviewees were fully informed of their rights and treated with respect. The study relies on a transparent, comprehensive field documentation that includes information about the data collection process, the respondents, the interview process, the analysis, and the interpretation process. Care was also taken to separate the results from the theoretical and practical interpretation of the data. Specific thoughts were given to the potential epistemological challenge that we deal with self-appraisals of what drives employees' commitment in a telework setting. By addressing their work context, asking reflective questions, and

considering various known job-related resources that strengthen commitment, we sought to complement interviewees' narratives and counteract simple rationalizations.

Findings

The aims of this study were to (1) find out about teleworkers' expectations regarding job-related resources to maintain and strengthen their commitment to the organization and (2) to elaborate how internal communication professionals can strategically address these resources in their communication. To contextualize the findings, we first present advantages and challenges perceived by teleworkers in Austria and Germany.

Perceived advantages and challenges in a telework setting

Interviewees mentioned that thanks to teleworking, they no longer have to commute to their workplace and thus have more time available for other daily activities/duties. In this context, several interviewees referred to the phenomenon as "personal optimization" based on the perception of flexibility and freedom in work performance to achieve personal goals in the areas of work, household, sports, nutrition and consumption. For those, telework was easy to incorporate in their daily lives and improved their work-life balance. The prerequisites were, primarily, a separate workplace, no care obligations, a stable social network and good technical equipment. They reported about an increase in concentration, efficiency and, interestingly satisfaction with fewer social interactions at work. In terms of digital work communication, the interviews pointed to advantages such as better knowledge of the organizations' values and activities, the ability to network virtually within the company, and spontaneous online meetings with colleagues. Further, they experienced better opportunities to participate in organizational processes because exchange formats had become visible and accessible.

Beyond, several interviewees pointed to different challenges, such as the loss of social interaction and loneliness. Spontaneous, informal "coffee meetings" get short and so does the personal connection to colleagues and the organization. The findings indicate that telework requires considerable motivation and effort by the individual employee to interact and be part of a network, i.e. to share information, problems and ideas with others, and thereby enhance the personal work experience.

> Meeting colleagues in the hallway, asking them how the weekend was, or taking a lunch break together - all that is lost. And with that, the social bond, i.e. the fact that you are connected to the organization, is also lost (I 19).

Those who did not endorse telework blamed their perceived disconnection from other organizational members for their reduced work motivation. They perceived a less open-minded exchange culture and a lack of feedback loops. Some mentioned that teleworking even increased their personal workload, because the workday revolved exclusively around getting the job done. Others lamented that concentrated work was a challenge leading to procrastination and job dissatisfaction. In terms of digital work communication, some interviewees felt that they received less information. They had the feeling that they experience less about what is happening in their organization despite the ability to share, comment, and like content on the intranet. In particular, task fulfillment was perceived as challenging when the information flow about organization-related activities was poor. This was attributed to a lack of communication on an interpersonal and informal level and limited social gatherings and events (with the team, department, and organization as a whole). At the same time, however, some regarded the high visibility of organizational happenings on the intranet and other internal online channels as a disadvantage because it increased the *fear of missing out on something (I 20).* In the same vein, some interviewees reported about the

difficulty to discern which information and events were important and which not. Even communication with digital tools as such was perceived as challenging (also stressful and exhausting) because nonverbal parameters like body language, gestures, tone of voice were conveyed differently than in the analogous world.

Job-related resources to strengthen employees' commitment in a telework setting
The analysis of the interview data resulted in eight job-related resources that contribute to teleworkers' organizational commitment (see Figure 1): (1) flexible, trustful work environment, (2) transparent internal communication, (3) opportunities to interact with top management and other organizational members, (4) participation in organizational processes, (5) organizational events, (6) appreciation, (7) branded objects representing the organization at home, and (8) perceptions of organizational support.

Flexible, trustful work environment. The way how an organization sets the official terms and conditions for telework is important for maintaining employees' commitment. Several interviewees named aspects such as the freedom and flexibility to organize their workday according to personal needs and a trustful handling by the organization (e.g. regarding working time):
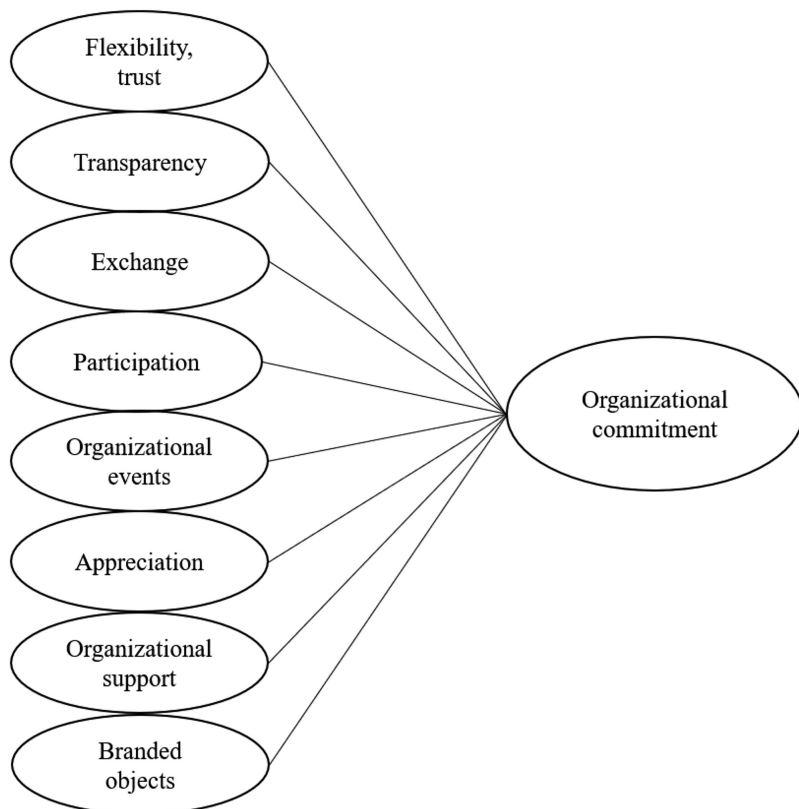

Figure 1.
Key resources driving employees' commitment in a telework setting

Source(s): Created by author

What I like about it is that I'm very flexible. For example, I start at 6 a.m., sit down and read a few e-mails if I'm not that fit yet. Or I read through some stuff on the intranet so I'm informed. That lasts until half past seven or eight. Then I take a quick shower so that I'm sitting there freshly for the first phone call at 8:30. But in the meantime, I could already do a bit of work and that would have actually been my whole commute. This way I can divide up the work in a completely different way, and I like that (I 12).

We can clock ourselves in and out now. Before, we had to send our working hours, also corrections. Now we can clock ourselves in and out on the PC - punch in, punch out, and I can punch in and out five times, depending on what suits me best (I 27).

The interviews furthermore show that mentioned aspects have to be visible in a clear work concept. Employees want to be up to date about applicable conditions of telework and be involved in future plans:

If people lose their sense of belonging, they are much more likely to leave, but that is dangerous in our industry. I would have liked to see a well thought-out concept for this work setting. For example, an info about home-office rules and future intentions regarding physical events (I 50).

Transparent internal communication. Most interviewees pointed to the importance of transparent internal communication. This implies information about current issues, the organizational strategy, planned actions, failures, and opportunities to engage. Despite being apart from their headquarters, teleworkers want to understand the actions and decisions of their organization and, to this end, regularly expect actual, timely, and relevant information via internal communication channels (e.g. intranet, e-mail). When asked what would be useful to strengthen the personal connection with their employer, one interviewee replied:

I would like us to be more informed about certain decisions or events that are made by our management. For example, our management issues a communiqué about changes once a month. It is always a lot of paper, but it contains little information (I 10).

Especially for teleworkers who start new at an organization, an employee-oriented flow of information is very important to create a sense of belonging:

I would say I don't feel very connected because I don't know the organization. It's always said that something is taking or has taken place or that this is what's great about the organization. But I can't judge that at all because I've never experienced it that way. So sometimes I feel excluded from the organization because it defines itself and draws its identity from a condition that I don't know. (I 19).

Additionally, transparent information about the organizations' values and philosophy contributes to teleworkers' feeling of connectedness. Managers, who are often better included in information flows, play a significant role in disseminating workplace and culture-related information. The following quotes exemplify this:

Then you sit in your cubbyhole at home and no longer feel anything for the company because you don't understand the philosophy (I 12).

However, various employees from a certain level below are no longer invited to organizational meetings. People then more or less trust that the relevant leaders will pass on the information (I 2).

The analysis also shows that transparent internal communication is particularly important for teleworkers with management responsibility:

I feel a bit disconnected because I no longer have strategic insight, because I have somehow lost contact. After all, I have to decide to go in one direction with my team, but that becomes difficult when you are disconnected from the management (I 37).

The top management, above all the CEO, becomes even more of a key informant and organizational symbol in times of distance. CEO communication can create proximity by

providing personal insights in addition to delivering relevant information. Formats such as short videos with personal insights are particularly welcome:

> I think it's especially important that they always offer a lot on the intranet and post news. Even videos of our CEO, for example. And I think it's cool to be up to date (I 24).

Opportunities to interact. Employees considered moments of low-threshold exchange as indispensable to maintain a good connection with the organization as a whole and with individual colleagues. Individualized (target group specific) and innovative formats are particularly valued to reduce barries and bridge the distance: informal virtual talks open to everybody, an employee app with different topic-based rooms for interaction, intranet sites where the organization posts information, videos with the possibility to like, share and comment, "Chatroulette" to connect with random organizational members, or a YouTube channel.

> We have a tool called Feedy. It is connected to every forum and visible to every employee. You can ask all the questions you have anonymously. About presentations, but also in general. Everyone can see the posts and vote if they have the same opinion. This works via thumbs up and thumbs down. If the number of thumbs up is very high, the boss is forced to answer (I 43).

> We have a community chat that everyone always signs up for every day. For example, we have a ritual that every morning in our chat we send a GIF and wish each other a good morning. That way you at least have the feeling of "okay, people are here" or someone is here (I 23).

> We have a new format where someone talks about things that went totally wrong. It can be a project or just a negative experience. The goal is that people can learn from it (I 12).

Participation in organizational processes. Several interviewees pointed to the advantage of virtually participating in organizational processes as it shows them that the organization counts on its members, their opinions, and actions. They mentioned interactive formats where they can make their needs and opinions known and credited the opportunity to participate in official surveys or discussion groups:

> For example, every Friday we get a small survey set with a maximum of 5 questions. And it's always about feedback - just "how do you feel, what can we change?" And that's where you can always contribute your opinion (I 25).

> We have a format with the entire management that is called Ask-Me-Anything where every employee, whether anonymous or not, can ask questions, also critical ones. And these are then answered in the livestream. And I think that was something that was actually very important so that everyone knows: What is really going on? (I 34).

Organizational events. Aside from smaller occasions to virtually interact and socialize, larger, often organization-wide events held online emerged as another important driver of commitment in a telework setting. Here employees can directly experience the organizational culture and values, learn what others do, connect and engage with members of the organization. Examples from the interviews include virtual townhall meetings, special interest networks, celebrations on specific occasions and fun activities such as an online escape-room game where creating shared experiences are paramount. At organizational events, interviewees also expect important issues to be addressed (e.g. broader socio-political engagement that also affects employees commitment to the organization):

> I think that internal online festivals or events also bind me to the company because it's kind of nice that the company does so much in terms of diversity and inclusion and also other topics like sustainability (I 20).

Interviewees lamented that virtual events were mostly organized by employees themselves; yet, more effort from the organization was expected.

Appreciation. Several interviewees stated that receiving appreciation from their manager and the organization is a personal need that contributes to their well-being, work motivation, and the feeling of being a valuable and needed member of the organization. While they addressed it as relevant factor, many pointed out to often miss it. The narratives show that appreciation can address good performances, but it can also be unconditionally expressed. By whom and how appreciation is communicated is very diverse. Importantly, the feeling of appreciation cannot be promoted by simple e-mail messages or in the form of blog posts on the intranet without a specific connection to the individual employees or their work. Highlighting the performance of individual employees or project teams in virtual town-hall meetings, videos, or general broadcasts is considered a better way of expressing appreciation. One interviewee mentioned an "appreciation channel", which was established specifically for valuing the work of employees.

> We also have livestream meetings that anyone can join. This time, one person from my team is going to present to the whole company about a tool test we did. When I asked him if he wanted to do that, he said, "Yeah, sure, that's cool, thanks for thinking of me". I think then the employee also feels valued for his work. That's important (I 34).

> I personally feel connected because I experience good conditions in my company, i.e. transparency, respect, no matter who you are, what you look like, you are treated the same. That's probably because of the whole communications department (I 30).

Perceptions of organizational support. Organizational support emerged as another highly relevant job-related resource. This includes organizational offers to maintain employees' physical and mental health, the provision of necessary technical equipment, and efficient solutions to digital problems.

> Everyone was provided with everything, whether it was computers or other equipment, and when it came to the lack of office chairs, the company gave those who needed one money to buy one (I 43).

> There is a virtual event called "People" where we can join various discussion groups and workshops. One time, a trainer came and talked about work-life balance, for example, or about mobile working. Or someone did a mindfulness training. Then you see 80 faces breathing in and out (I 12).

Experiencing that the employer is a fair and loyal partner, as evidenced by equal treatment and mutual support (socially, psychologically and professionally), also falls under organizational support that contributes to strengthening the sense of belonging.

> The company signals: Yes, we understand all your worries and needs, where else can we help you? (I 35)

> And the whole thing is backed up with regular employee surveys every three months: Do they feel sufficiently informed? What are the issues of most concern at the moment? Do they have, I don't know, existential fears? How well do they think we are positioned currently? (I 35)

Branded objects. Finally, objects that are branded with the organization's corporate logo and design (e.g. branded sweaters or mugs) are of high significance for teleworking employees:

> I got fan merchandise from my company. Not many people get that, I got it because I helped with a project in Germany. These are things that you wear with pride at home (I 20).

Some mentioned that they missed seeing their organization's logo when working from home:

> The branding, for example, the big logo that you normally see proudly when you walk into the company, is no longer there at home. I used to think "ah cool, that's just a cool company" - that's less the case now because I sit down at my laptop every day and I don't notice the branding anymore (I 29).

The visual, when you go to work, strengthens this feeling of connectedness. If you just sit at home and see everything digitally and close your laptop, this feeling weakens (I 23).

Providing these eight types of job-related resources can bridge the distance between the organization and teleworkers and to respond to the lack of or reduced on-site experiences. It is worth noting that interviewees mentioned that developing a sense of belonging with the organization is also a matter of individual well-being. They were very clear about the challenges of a teleworking arrangement and the necessity to personally address these challenges. They want information about the strategy, values, and development of the organization as well as being supported by it and to participate in its processes. Some interviewees gave examples what their organization was already doing, others had concrete ideas for improvements. The narratives also show that value and usability of these job-related resources (e.g. relational ones, such as room for exchange, participation options, and social events) depend on personal characteristics and preferences.

Overall, the results shed light on how important it is to get to know employees better, i.e. what drives their daily work motivation and commitment, how they arrange their work days, how they prefer interaction and exchange, what support they need. Additionally, we see that basic hygiene factors (e.g. technical equipment, access to the intranet, forum for exchange) are not sufficient to maintain employees' commitment – employees need a mix of job-related resources that operate on an informational and on a relational level. Resources, such as appreciation, room for exchange, participation, and organizational events are even more indispensable in a telework setting to learn about routines and habits and to experience the organizational culture and values.

Internal communication's contribution to address teleworkers' needed resources

The second aim of this study was to elaborate how internal communication professionals can incorporate these job-related resources in their strategic communication. The data suggest a differentiation between informational and relational forms of internal communication (Einwiller *et al.*, 2021) to address the resources expected and needed by teleworkers.

Informational communication. Fostering employees' perception of *transparency* can predominantly be addressed by means of informational communication (see also Carriére and Bourque, 2009; Ecklebe and Löffler, 2021; Einwiller *et al.*, 2021). Statements like "*I don't feel very connected because I don't know the organization*" emphasize the importance of a good information flow about organizational values, strategic decisions, specific actions and offers (e.g. engagement in sponsoring activities, organizational events, and options for participation, education and training) including technical and psychological support, and insights into what's going on in other departments (see also Walden *et al.*, 2017). The remark "*It is always a lot of paper, but little information*" highlights the importance to know employees' information expectations to be able to carefully decide what to communicate and how in order to achieve communication satisfaction – a major antecedent of organizational commitment (Carriére and Bourque, 2009). Accordingly, Tkalac Verčič and Špoljarić (2020) stress that employees' satisfaction with internal communication "is a result of intricate combinations of media, content, situational and personality factors" (p. 6). The interviews emphasize that teleworkers like to be informed through familiar channels like e-mails, intranet, virtual townhall meetings, the social intranet, or an interactive employee-app. Importantly, several interviewees point to the phenomenon of information overload, because organizational information is not structured comprehensibly and meaningfully for their information needs. When designing the internal media and content, communication professionals need to consider the specificities of different internal stakeholder groups – i.e. the way different groups of employees perform their work, receive information and communicate – in order to reach all equally (Men, 2021; Tkalac Verčič and Špoljarić, 2020) and

reduce information asymmetries. A particularly demanding group are new hires with a teleworking arrangement, because of their still limited knowledge about the organization as a whole and no previous experience with the organizational culture including its habits, routines, and values. These employees have particular expectations regarding internal information processes and higher requirements for information.

A *flexible and trustful work environment* is another job-related resource necessary to bolster teleworkers' commitment, which can be supported well by informational internal communication. The interviews show that internal communication professionals can contribute by regularly communicating official work rules, work-related changes, and planned organizational developments. Teleworkers furthermore benefit from a code of conduct for virtual communication and collaboration. Internal communication professionals are among the key communicators of information to ensure that everybody knows their rights and receives the information needed.

Relational communication. Internal communication professionals further contribute to employees' commitment in terms of their relational function (Men, 2021). Overall, internal listening is crucial to fulfill this. Communication professionals can find out about teleworkers' expectations and needs through regular surveys, two-way symmetrical communication on internal social media, discussion rounds and Q&A sessions. Accordingly, scholars emphasize that organizational and managerial listening "helps satisfy employees' psychological needs (i.e. relatedness, autonomy, and competence), the basis of employees' psychological wellbeing, which in turn facilitates the cultivation of a trusting, satisfied, committed, and empowered relationship with the organization" (Qin and Men, 2021, p. 380).

Communication professionals can and should facilitate *participation* and *exchange* of employees. Interviewees mentioned the importance of having easily accessible informal virtual spaces that allow interpersonal exchange and department-spanning communication where work-related but also personal topics can be discussed. To foster commitment, teleworkers need to be able to simply, regularly, and quickly communicate virtually with their colleagues and managers. As Jacobs (2008) noted, the "use of communication systems that enable and require continuous oral/audio and face-to-face modes of interaction that are immediate, participative and combine social and task functions" (p. 51; also see Jacobs, 2006) is highly relevant. The interviews refer to several ways how communication professionals can support teleworkers' need for participation and exchange; this includes providing virtual coffee rooms, topic-based discussion corners, virtual webinars with FAQs, and townhall meetings with the possibility to interact in a chat. Participation can also be fostered by regularly communicating what other units and teams do and how teleworkers can engage in their projects.

Larger *organizational events* are a place to get to know other organizational members, position oneself, get to know projects and possibilities for participation, and, most importantly, experience the organizational culture. Internal communication professionals can directly contribute to providing this resource by organizing and communicating about such events. While larger events can be successfully organized online, as has been done during the COVID-19 pandemic, in-person events create a more vivid experience and can thus be particularly important to strengthen teleworkers' commitment.

The interviews highlight that teleworkers need people-centric communication, which includes profound communication of *appreciation* and *support* (see also Einwiller *et al.*, 2021; Mazzei *et al.*, 2023; Rhoades and Eisenberger, 2002). Teleworkers particularly expect to receive appreciation from their managers as they are the ones close to them. Yet, internal communication professionals can contribute to fostering teleworkers' perception of appreciation by making successful projects visible (e.g. on the intranet), creating and communicating awards, showcasing projects from around the organization, and by facilitating the discussion of needs and addressing questions in virtual townhall meetings.

It also includes listening to teleworkers' needs, thereby showing that they are taken seriously and that their voice counts. Support can be provided where it regards the needs for communication; but it also includes conveying the information about the needed support to the managers who can specifically provide it, thereby acting as key speakers for employees' needs. As Állen (1992) conclude "employees who pick up cues that indicate they are not supported or valued by their organization are probably less likely to develop or maintain organizational commitment" (p. 364).

Finally, communication professionals can provide teleworkers with *branded objects*. In cooperation with other departments such as marketing, HR and IT, communication professionals can think about appropriate ways to keep the organization symbolically present for employees in a telework setting. This can include physical objects like coffee mugs, coasters, or other household items, work items like pens or writing pads, as well as clothing, which is particularly effective as it becomes part of the person's physical appearance. Electronic objects like screen savers can also help to regularly remind people of the corporate brand and strengthen their sense of belongingness.

Discussing potential roles of internal communication professionals

The purpose of this study was (1) to identify job-related resources (Bakker *et al.*, 2023) that can be provided by the organization to strengthen teleworkers' organizational commitment, as previous research points to challenges with keeping up employees' commitment in a telework setting (Mazzei *et al.*, 2023; Wang *et al.*, 2020), and (2) to clarify how internal communication professionals can contribute to strategically address these resources in their communication. Based on the research findings, we discuss three important roles that internal communication professionals have to fulfill in a teleworking context: strategic communicators and networkers, enablers, and key speakers for employees' needs.

Teleworking can spread employees across the globe – informal conversations, quick exchanges at the office, and on-site celebrations are no longer a given. Physical distance makes it difficult for organizations to maintain contact and to include and reach all employees equally. The distance breaks through routines and the habitus of organizational functioning. Employees need much more explicit information and instructions (for action), since their physical on-site experiences with certain processes are reduced or eliminated completely. They have to hear or read about them online in order to internalize and reproduce them. As a result, internal communication professionals take on a great deal of responsibility as *strategic communicators* in informing managers, other units, and employees about organizational actions, processes, decisions, and plans in a timely and comprehensible manner. As Postmes *et al.* (2001) showed in their research, vertical communication is particularly important for fostering employees' organizational commitment, and the communication department takes on a key role here. To effectively fulfill their role, communication professionals must find suitable formats, transfer the organization's daily information and communication into the virtual space, and promote transparency (e.g. Ecklebe and Löffler, 2021) based on employees' expectations (Blau, 1964). Additionally, they are partly responsible to shape the virtual communication climate to be appreciative and supportive. Their daily work is therefore based on the eagerness to experiment, be creative and flexible, and act fast.

Fulfilling the role as *strategic communicator* also implies strong *networking initiatives*. Knowing what other departments (e.g. HR) and organizational members (e.g, the CEO and board of directors) are doing and have planned is essential to collaborate and act strategically. While the internal communication department examines teleworkers' expectations, solutions to meet them and provide full support are often connected to the work of other internal departments. Thus, the present findings underscore the need to further extend the discourse on strategic internal communication (Zerfass *et al.*, 2020) in times of more teleworking. What

clearly emerges from the present research is that the increase of teleworking enhances the overall scope of action for internal communicators, because addressing the job-related resources that contribute to teleworkers' commitment are highly communication-intensive.

The results of this study furthermore show that communication professionals must increasingly take on the role as *enabler* (see also Men, 2021; Zerfass and Franke, 2013), as not only they, but also everyone else in the organization must have good communication skills (for example to share work-related problems and clearly express their needs and demands in a virtual context). For communication-related issues, enabling means consulting organizational members "to master communicative challenges themselves by providing and supporting communicative structures, processes, and competencies ranging from active communication competencies (outbound) and perceptual and interpretative competencies (inbound) to cooperative competencies (integrative)" (Zerfass and Franke, 2013., p. 130). Enabling further implies to educate and train employees to become better communicators, but it also means keeping the barriers to participate and exchange low. It involves teaching everyone communication skills – from the CEO, to managers, and all employees –so that they can actively support one another in a telework setting (e.g. knowledge sharing) and communicate transparently, appreciatively and at "eye level". The enabler role supports all organizational actors in their internal but also in their external communication. In a telework context, the organization's top managers, and above all the CEO, are not only important communicators, but also symbols for the organization. In a sense, the CEO replaces the headquarter or the worksite as a spatial reference point for identification. Adapting CEO communication accordingly is important and pronounces internal communication's role as enabler. Whereas before it was limited to exposed communicators, like the CEO (e.g. Men, 2021; Zerfass and Franke, 2013), it now spans every single member to keep up teleworkers' communication and connection despite the spatial distance.

Lastly, the results indicate that communication professionals seize the role as *key speakers* for teleworkers' needs. They empower teleworkers by listening to them, collecting their feedback to organizational processes, and creating possibilities for them to participate in the organizational process. Importantly, the internal communication department seizes responsibility to collect the different perceptions and needs, to then identify the concrete job-related resources, prioritize them, and instruct others when and how to address them. Communication professionals serve as the mouthpiece for teleworkers' needs, they give them a face through knowing who they are and what they want. They stand up for them in front of the top management and other relevant units. Sometimes they even have to act in favor of them (e.g. raise their concerns about loneliness and procrastination, articulate social injustice) and negotiate their needed job-related resources to foster their health and motivational processes (see Bakker *et al.*, 2023). This implies a tight coordination with the top management, managers, and particularly HR. Assuming the role as key speaker is only realizable when internal communication professionals see themselves also as strategic partners of other key communicators in a telework setting.

Conclusion, limitations and future research

From a theoretical point of view, this study assumes that teleworkers' relationship with their organization strongly depends on how their general and particular expectations (Blau, 1964) concerning their work arrangements are fulfilled and addressed in strategic organzational communication. As the J-DR model proposes, "job resources satisfy basic psychological needs and foster employee work engagement" (Bakker *et al.*, 2023, p. 33), which is a relevant outcome of commitment (Meyer *et al.*, 2002). The study highlights several job-related resources (Bakker *et al.*, 2023) that contribute to organizational commitment from the perspectives of teleworking employees. Furthermore, the study highlights particular ways to

strategically address these resources through internal communication, pointing directly to specific roles of communication professionals (Men, 2021).

The findings and implications must be viewed in light of several limitations inherent to the presented study. As the results are based on a qualitative interview series with teleworkers in Austrian and German organizations, it is not possible to generalize the identified resources to other work contexts. Besides, when the data were collected, the COVID-19 pandemic was still present. Because of the changes the pandemic has brought to the world of work in general and teleworking in particular, expectations may change in the next years due to new regulations. Further, it is not possible to draw conclusions about the impact of the identified resources on employees' commitment or say something about the interplay of job-related and personal home-related resources (see Work-Home Resource Model, Ten Brummelhuis and Bakker, 2012). A methodological shortcoming may be that interviews tend to simply rationalize a research problem as interviewees might not exactly know what drives their commitment. The results are therefore limited to what employees personally find relevant and plausible to strengthen their sense of connectedness with the organization. To clarify the scope of action for internal communicators, it would be valuable to assess also the viewpoints of internal communication professionals in order to analyze and discuss the tension between possibilities and actual feasibility. The effective scope of communication activities by professionals should also be discussed in light of HR practices and the role of CEOs, managers and coworkers in fostering affective commitment. A case study of an organization with a high percentage of teleworking arrangements would deliver valuable insights.

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(The Appendix follows overleaf)

Appendix

Nr	Gender	Profession	Age	Managerial responsibility	Country	Years of employment	Duration
1	f	HR employee	54	no	AUT	16	58:00
2	m	IT project manager	58	yes	AUT	4	63:00
3	f	Sales and marketing specialist	53	yes	AUT	6	42:00
4	m	Online editor	29	no	AUT	4	39:00
5	m	IT specialist	55	no	AUT	38	44:00
6	m	Programmer	56	yes	AUT	38	61:00
7	f	Recruiter	22	no	AUT	0.5	30:30
8	m	Logistics employee	25	no	AUT	3	30:20
9	m	Social media editor	24	no	AUT	0.7	27:30
10	f	Customer service employee	49	no	GER	18	54:00
11	m	Sales employee	45	no	GER	19	59:00
12	f	Workplace security employee	47	yes	GER	20	128:00
13	m	Customer service employee	63	no	AUT	33	49:40
14	f	Administrative staff	26	no	AUT	1.5	51:50
15	f	Project manager	47	no	AUT	5	55:00
16	m	Sales employee	50	no	AUT	10	57:00
17	m	Material compliance employee	29	no	GER	2	48:20
18	f	Trainee	25	yes	GER	1.5	75:00
19	f	Fundraiser	27	no	GER	1	70:00
20	f	Project manager	23	no	AUT	1.5	52:10
21	f	Assistant	31	no	AUT	4	50:20
22	m	Product developer	55	yes	AUT	35	60:40
23	f	Marketing manager	25	no	GER	1.5	55:00
24	f	Content creator	25	no	AUT	2	53:00
25	f	Social media manager	26	no	GER	***	
26	m	Administrative staff	58	yes	AUT	32	56:00
27	–	Sales employee	57	yes	AUT	25	46:00
28	f	Assistant	24	no	AUT	2.5	37:00
29	m	Project manager	22	no	AUT	2	47:00
30	m	BI analyst and AP developer	28	yes	AUT	2.5	66:00
31	f	Consultant	25	yes	AUT	4	37:00
32	m	Customer service employee	31	no	GER	4	46:00
33	f	Director of support	42	yes	AUT	10	40:00
34	m	User acquisition	33	yes	GER	3	74:50
35	m	Personal manager	42	yes	GER	15	59:30
36	f	Secretary	60	no	GER	10	41:40
37	m	Vice president support	42	yes	AUT	13	55:00
38	f	Trainer	48	no	AUT	20	40:00
39	f	Administrative staff	31	no	AUT	***	38:00
40	m	Country manager	50	yes	AUT	7	47:00
41	m	Customer service employee	43	no	AUT	10	46:00

Table A1.
Overview of
interviewees

Nr	Gender	Profession	Age	Managerial responsibility	Country	Years of employment	Duration
42	m	Consultant	62	yes	AUT	20	62:00
43	f	Product owner	34	yes	GER	4	65:00
44	m	Product manager	64	yes	GER	23	104:00
45	f	Trainee customer experience management	24	no	AUT	0.5	43:00
46	f	Video editor	26	no	AUT	3	42:00
47	m	Press aide	34	yes	AUT	***	40:00
48	f	Event manager	56	no	AUT	12	71:00
49	m	Project assistant	28	no	AUT	2.5	52:00
50	m	Customer works manager	35	no	AUT	5	60:00

Note(s): *** no data available
Source(s): Created by authors

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