FACULTY OF ECONOMICS AND BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION

EXPLORING CONFIGURATIONS OF ORGANIZATIONAL DESIGN: PRACTICES AND TRADE-OFFS IN UNCONVENTIONAL APPROACHES

By

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Acknowledgments

This journey has been shaped by many people—some walked with me from the beginning, others appeared just when needed, fulfilling their role before stepping away. In line with this thesis on unconventional approaches, I want to offer my thanks in a similarly unconventional way: through a chronological tribute to those who joined me along the way.

It began in 2017, with an idea that came before its time. I wasn't accepted into the programme, but when I explored the possibility of applying, Luis, Natalia, and María José supported me generously. That early trust laid the foundation for what would come later.

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Credit author statement

This thesis is presented as a monograph and has been entirely written by the author, Eva María Agruña Barrón. One article has been accepted for publication in the Journal of Organizational Design, a peer-reviewed journal viewed as the intellectual home of organization design thinking. This article is based on the empirical content developed in Chapters 2 and 3.

Contributions to the thesis as a whole, including the accepted paper, are as follows:

- Eva María Agruña Barrón: conceptualization; data curation; formal analysis; investigation; methodology; project administration; resources; validation; visualization; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing.
- The co-authors of the paper accepted for publication, María Jesús Belizón Cebada and Raquel Redondo Palomo, are also the academic advisors to this dissertation. They primarily contributed to the article in a supervisory capacity, mainly providing intellectual guidance and comments during the development of the article and the review process. Additionally, they were also involved in reviewing and editing the article once advanced drafts were provided by the leading author at different stages of the research process.

Use of GenAI statement

During the preparation of this dissertation, I used ChatGPT-4 (developed by OpenAI) to support specific stages of the research process in a strictly auxiliary manner. In particular, I employed this tool to brainstorm conceptual directions and possible academic references, to generate first-draft translations of selected verbatim excerpts from Spanish to English, and to explore alternative ways of expressing or synthetizing certain analytical ideas. All translated segments were subsequently reviewed, refined, and validated manually to ensure contextual accuracy and terminological precision. At no point were full interview transcripts, confidential information, or identifiable participant data submitted to the tool; only isolated, de-identified phrases were used for language assistance purposes. The tool was not used for data analysis, coding, or any core interpretive work. After using this tool/service, I reviewed and edited the content as needed and therefore, I take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

Abstract

This dissertation examines how certain Spanish small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) develop and sustain unconventional organizational designs in contexts marked by high complexity and uncertainty. Although there is a growing body of literature on unconventional organizational design, empirical studies that explore in depth how these organizational forms are configured and operate remain limited. This research aims to understand which elements define such designs, how they interact, and what tensions their leaders face in day-to-day practice.

Based on a qualitative case study approach, the thesis analyzes five Spanish SMEs selected due to external recognition for adopting structures that deviate from traditional hierarchical models. The fieldwork combines semi-structured interviews with ethnographic research and analysis of secondary sources, enabling a holistic understanding of the organizational practices observed.

The analysis identifies six key components that characterize these unconventional organizational designs: responsible freedom, ample transparency, collaborative and boundaryless workflows, adaptive governance, disruptive and continuous innovation, and sustainable impact. These components do not operate in isolation but interact with each other, giving rise to specific configurations that allow organizations to function in a coherent and adaptive manner. The study also reveals the trade-offs associated with each block and underscores that these models are not easily replicable, as they emerge from contingent and context-specific processes.

The thesis contributes to the organizational design literature by providing empirical evidence on underexplored organizational forms, by integrating structural, cultural, and coordination-related dimensions, and by proposing a configurational framework to understand organizational design beyond hierarchy. In addition, it offers practical implications for business leaders, consultants, and educators interested in transforming organizations towards more sustainable, participatory, and resilient models.

Keywords: unconventional organization design, organizational structure, organizational culture, responsible freedom, collaborative and boundaryless workflows, ample transparency, adaptive governance, disruptive and continuous innovation and sustainable impact.

Resumen

Esta tesis analiza cómo ciertas pequeñas y medianas empresas españolas desarrollan y sostienen diseños organizativos no convencionales en contextos marcados por alta complejidad e incertidumbre. Aunque existe una literatura creciente sobre diseños organizativos no convencionales, los estudios empíricos que exploran en profundidad cómo se configuran y operan estas formas organizativas siguen siendo escasos. Esta investigación busca entender qué elementos definen estos diseños, cómo se combinan entre sí y qué tensiones enfrentan sus responsables en la práctica cotidiana.

A partir de un enfoque cualitativo basado en estudios de caso, se han analizado cinco pymes españolas seleccionadas por su reconocimiento externo por haber adoptado estructuras alejadas de los modelos jerárquicos tradicionales. El trabajo de campo ha combinado entrevistas semiestructuradas con investigación etnográfica y análisis de fuentes secundarias, permitiendo una aproximación holística a las prácticas organizativas observadas.

El análisis identifica seis bloques constructivos que caracterizan estos diseños organizativos no convencionales: Gobierno adaptativo, Libertad responsable, Amplia transparencia, Flujos colaborativos y sin barreras, Innovación disruptiva y continua, e Impacto sostenible. Estos componentes no actúan de forma aislada, sino que interactúan entre sí, generando configuraciones específicas que permiten a las organizaciones operar de forma coherente y adaptativa. La investigación también revela los trade-offs asociados a cada bloque y subraya que estos modelos no son fácilmente replicables, sino que emergen de procesos contingentes y contextuales.

La tesis contribuye a la literatura de diseño organizativo al aportar evidencia empírica sobre formas organizativas poco exploradas, al integrar dimensiones estructurales, culturales y de coordinación, y al proponer un marco configuracional para entender el diseño organizativo más allá de la jerarquía. Además, ofrece implicaciones prácticas para líderes empresariales, consultores y responsables de formación interesados en transformar sus organizaciones hacia modelos más sostenibles, participativos y resilientes.

Palabras clave: diseño organizativo no convencional, estructura organizativa, cultura organizacional, gobierno adaptativo, libertad responsable, amplia transparencia, flujos colaborativos y sin barreras, innovación disruptiva y continua, impacto sostenible.

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Permissions and data protection

All necessary authorizations for the use of data in this study have been obtained, adhering rigorously to data protection regulations and measures as mandated by Spanish and European law.

Stringent measures were implemented to ensure the confidentiality, integrity, and ethical handling of all data collected and analysed throughout this research process. All informants involved in this study have provided signed informed consent, confirming their voluntary participation and understanding of the study's purpose and procedures. The ethical and legal frameworks governing data protection were upheld at every stage, safeguarding the rights and privacy of all individuals involved in this study. No identification is provided throughout the document. The author has obtained the corresponding permissions to use the data, duly anonymized.

Introduction

1. Framing the study

This opening chapter introduces the thesis by positioning the research within the broader landscape of contemporary organizational theory. It begins by outlining the background and motivation that inform the study, drawing attention to the conceptual and empirical gaps in the existing literature on organizational design, particularly in relation to emerging, unconventional models of organizing. On this basis, the chapter articulates the central research aim and guiding questions, which shape the analytical orientation and methodological choices of the study.

The chapter then briefly presents the research design adopted to investigate these questions, including the epistemological stance and the rationale for employing a qualitative, multi-case approach. In doing so, it sets the stage for the detailed methodological exposition provided in subsequent chapters. Finally, the structure of the thesis is outlined to provide the reader with a clear roadmap of the study's progression, from theoretical foundations to empirical findings, discussion, and conclusions.

2. Background for the study

In recent years, the field of organizational design (OD) has witnessed a resurgence of interest, driven by the increasing complexity, volatility, and interdependence of organizational environments. Contemporary firms are compelled to navigate heightened demands for agility, innovation, and responsiveness, often within resource-constrained or highly dynamic competitive contexts (Doz and Kosonen, 2008; Gerster et al., 2020; Martela, 2019). In response, many organizations have begun to question the adequacy of traditional hierarchical structures and explore alternative design configurations that offer greater flexibility, decentralization, and adaptability.

This evolving landscape has given rise to a growing number of organizational experiments, commonly referred to as "unconventional organizational designs." These include, among others, models such as holacracy, sociocracy, and teal organizations, which eschew rigid bureaucratic templates in favor of more fluid, participatory, and self-managed forms of organizing (Lee and Edmondson, 2017; Laloux, 2015; Robertson, 2015). While initially regarded as marginal or ideologically motivated, such configurations are now increasingly embraced by firms across sectors, including knowledge-intensive industries, technology

startups, and purpose-driven enterprises (Bernstein et al., 2016; Mateer et al., 2025). This proliferation of design experimentation reflects a broader shift in managerial discourse and practice, in which OD is no longer approached as a stable blueprint but as an evolving and context-sensitive endeavor (Foss and Klein, 2012; Gulati et al., 2012).

Despite this growing interest, scholarly engagement with unconventional OD remains conceptually fragmented and empirically underdeveloped. Much of the literature is either prescriptive, focused on promoting specific models, or limited to single-case analyses that offer rich but contextually bounded insights (Martela, 2019; Billinger and Workiewicz, 2019). Moreover, academic debate often polarizes around the merits and limitations of horizontal versus hierarchical arrangements, without sufficiently theorizing the multidimensional configurations that characterize many real-world organizations, especially those adopting hybrid or evolving forms (Puranam et al., 2014; Schell and Bischof, 2022).

This thesis emerges from the recognition of this theoretical and empirical gap. It responds to the need for a more integrative, inductive understanding of unconventional OD by examining how such designs are constructed, experienced, and sustained in practice. Focusing on five Spanish small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) that have publicly embraced unconventional organizational models, the study seeks to investigate the constitutive elements (herein referred to as components) that characterize these organizations. While the sample is rooted in the Spanish context, the research engages with a phenomenon of broader theoretical relevance and international resonance, contributing to global conversations on organizational innovation and design.

Importantly, the study recognizes that few organizations adopt “pure” models that align neatly with existing typologies. Instead, many engage in deliberate hybridization, combining elements from multiple frameworks to address their specific strategic and cultural imperatives. This trend towards hybrid and emergent forms further underscores the importance of empirical research capable of capturing the complexity and fluidity of contemporary organizational arrangements.

By situating the inquiry within this evolving field of study, the thesis aims to contribute both conceptual clarity and empirical depth to the understanding of unconventional OD, offering a grounded perspective on how novel organizational forms are assembled, enacted, and navigated within real-world contexts.

3. Research aim, rationale and research questions

This thesis seeks to contribute to the theoretical and empirical understanding of OD by investigating how organizations deliberately depart from conventional hierarchical structures and instead adopt alternative forms of organizing. While a substantial body of literature has examined specific models of non-traditional organization, such as holacracy, sociocracy, or "teal" organizations (Robertson, 2015; Laloux, 2015; Buck and Villines, 2007), these studies often remain confined to singular typologies or prescriptive frameworks. As a result, the broader phenomenon of unconventional organizational design (unconventional OD) remains conceptually fragmented and empirically under-theorized (Martela, 2019; Billinger and Workiewicz, 2019; Joseph et al., 2024), a situation that persists despite a growing scholarly interest in organizational hybridity, post-bureaucratic models, and distributed forms of governance in recent years (Gerster et al., 2021; Cappa et al., 2021).

The central research aim of this study is to advance theoretical understanding of unconventional OD by identifying and analysing the components that recurrently characterize organizations seeking to transcend traditional bureaucratic templates. This inductive investigation addresses a critical gap in the literature: although multiple studies have highlighted isolated aspects of non-hierarchical organizing (e.g., autonomy, decentralization, or transparency), few have sought to develop an integrative, empirically grounded conceptualization of how such elements coalesce into viable and coherent organizational models (Foss and Klein, 2012; Lee and Edmondson, 2017).

Accordingly, the overarching research aim of this thesis is to identify and analyse the components that recurrently characterize organizations seeking to transcend traditional organisational designs. This aim reflects the exploratory nature of the study, grounded in empirical engagement with practice rather than the validation of pre-established models.

To guide this inquiry, four interrelated research questions are formulated. Together, they structure the analytical path from component identification to systemic understanding, internal tensions, and associated outcomes.

RQ1: What are the components that characterize unconventional OD? This foundational question seeks to identify the recurring features that distinguish organizations which operate beyond conventional OD. The aim is not to construct an ideal type, but to inductively surface

the components that appear consistently across diverse empirical contexts and that contribute to the distinctive functioning of such organizations.

RQ2: How are these components interrelated, and what is the significance of their interaction in shaping organizational dynamics? This question seeks to uncover whether the identified elements operate in isolation or as an interdependent system, and how their interplay enables or constrains organizational functioning.

RQ3: To what extent do these elements generate internal tensions or trade-offs, and how are such tensions managed or resolved within organizational practice? While each element may appear desirable in isolation, their simultaneous implementation may produce organizational paradoxes that require balancing mechanisms.

RQ4: What organizational outcomes structural, behavioral, or strategic are associated with the adoption and configuration of these components? This question examines whether and how the presence of these elements contributes to distinct patterns of performance, collaboration, and adaptability.

Collectively, these questions support a multi-level and systemic understanding of unconventional OD, moving beyond the evaluation of discrete practices to explore how unconventional ODs are assembled, navigated, and sustained in practice. In doing so, the study positions itself within the broader tradition of organization theory while responding to contemporary calls for more empirical engagement with emerging and hybrid forms of organizing (Puranam et al., 2014; Gulati et al., 2012; Romme, 2019).

4. Research methodology

To explore how unconventional OD is socially constructed and experienced in practice, and to inductively interpret its constitutive features, this study adopts a qualitative, exploratory, and interpretivist research design, guided by the recognition that emergent organizational forms often elude pre-established categories and require contextually grounded analysis (Creswell, 2013; Edmondson and McManus, 2007). The research seeks to understand how organizational actors experience, interpret, and actively construct alternative approaches to structure, coordination, and governance (Saunders et al., 2012).

Consistent with this philosophical orientation, the study employs a multiple case study methodology, drawing on the logic of theoretical replication (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2018). Five Spanish SMEs were purposefully selected based on their public identification with unconventional OD practices, their demonstrated long-term viability, and their openness to deep organizational access.

To ensure data triangulation and analytical depth, the study integrates multiple sources of evidence, including 48 semi-structured interviews, over 150 hours of ethnographic observation, and a wide range of archival materials including internal documents, external media, and digital content. The data collection strategy was designed to capture both formal and informal dimensions of organizational life, enabling a fine-grained understanding of how design principles are enacted and sustained in everyday practice (Langley and Abdallah, 2011; Spradley, 2016).

The analytical process followed an inductive, iterative logic, grounded in established procedures for theory-building from case study research (Gioia et al., 2013; Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007). The data were first analyzed within each case, followed by cross-case comparison to identify recurring themes and components. The resulting data structure comprises six interrelated components that consistently characterize unconventional OD across the five firms: responsible freedom, ample transparency, collaborative and boundaryless workflows, adaptive governance, disruptive and continuous, and sustainable impact.

By adopting this qualitative, multi-case strategy, the research not only identifies the elements of unconventional OD but also sheds light on their interrelations, trade-offs, and organizational consequences, thus contributing empirically and conceptually to contemporary debates in OD. Greater detail of the research methodology can be found in Chapter 2.

5. Structure of the thesis

The remainder of the thesis is structured as follows:

Chapter one: the **Theoretical background** reviews the relevant literature on OD, critically examining both traditional and emerging perspectives. The chapter problematizes conceptual ambiguities in the field and outlines the core components and historical evolution of organizational design theory. Special attention is given to unconventional OD, including

sociocracy, holacracy, and teal organizations. The chapter concludes by articulating the need for a holistic empirical approach to explore these unconventional forms.

Chapter two: the **Research methodology** explains the methodological underpinnings of the study. It details the research philosophy and strategy, the methodological approach, data collection techniques, and analytical procedures employed. The chapter justifies the use of a multiple-case study design and outlines the logic of case selection, ethical safeguards, and data triangulation methods. Particular attention is given to the development of research instruments, the negotiation of organizational access, and the iterative nature of the analytical process. Additionally, the chapter highlights the researcher's reflexive stance throughout the fieldwork, as well as the measures adopted to ensure credibility, interpretive rigour, and contextual sensitivity.

Chapter three: the **Findings** presents the empirical results of the study. It identifies six interrelated components that characterize unconventional OD: responsible freedom, ample transparency, collaborative and boundaryless workflows, adaptive governance, disruptive and continuous, and sustainable impact. Each building block is explored in depth through illustrative data excerpts and thematic analysis, followed by a discussion of the interdependencies and trade-offs among them.

Chapter four: the **Discussion** situates the findings within the broader academic literature, articulating how the results contribute to existing debates in OD theory. It discusses the systemic interplay among the identified components and reflects on the conditions under which they may be transferred or adapted to conventional organizational contexts. The chapter also elaborates on the conceptual, empirical, and practical contributions of the study.

Finally, the **concluding section** synthesizes the main findings of the study and situates them within the broader literature on OD. It outlines the study's conceptual, empirical, and practical contributions, highlights its methodological and contextual limitations, and proposes directions for future research.

Chapter 1. Theoretical background

1.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to establish the theoretical foundations upon which this study is built. While the introduction section articulated the rationale and empirical ambition of the thesis, this chapter deepens the conceptual framing by situating the research within existing academic debates on OD. It does so by critically examining the evolution, scope, and core dimensions of the OD field, with particular attention to emerging configurations that deviate from conventional organizational models.

The chapter is structured to progress from the general to the specific. It begins by exploring how OD has been conceptualized historically and how its meaning has shifted in response to changing organizational, technological, and societal demands. This review foregrounds the conceptual ambiguities that pervade the literature, particularly the terminological variation and inconsistent boundaries that complicate the field. In response, the chapter delineates the core components of OD (structure, coordination and communication mechanisms, and organizational culture) offering a coherent lens for empirical investigation.

The chapter then traces the intellectual evolution of OD, highlighting how contemporary scholarship has expanded its analytical focus to encompass dynamic systems, individual agency, and inter-organizational networks. Particular attention is paid to the redefinition of organizational boundaries, as firms increasingly adopt decentralized, agile, and participatory forms of organizing. These developments underscore the growing relevance of what has been termed unconventional OD, a focal concept of this thesis.

Building on this foundation, the chapter introduces and defines the concept of unconventional OD, reviewing key models such as self-managed organizations, holacracy, sociocracy, and teal organizations. It then identifies the conceptual limitations of current literature, notably the scarcity of integrative empirical studies that examine unconventional OD as a holistic phenomenon. The chapter concludes by articulating the need for a systematic and inductively driven inquiry capable of capturing the multidimensionality, hybridity, and context-dependence of unconventional OD.

Through this comprehensive theoretical overview, the chapter provides the necessary groundwork for the empirical analysis that follows. It not only clarifies the conceptual

vocabulary used throughout the thesis but also positions the study within ongoing efforts to develop more robust, flexible, and context-sensitive theories of organizing.

1.2 Organizational design

The field of OD has attracted significant scholarly attention due to the increasing complexity of contemporary organizations. This interest has been driven by a range of organizational challenges, including the need for agility (Doz and Kosonen, 2008), resilience, social responsiveness, and the balance between innovation and efficiency (Gulati et al., 2012).

Traditionally, OD has been conceptualized as the structured allocation of tasks and coordination mechanisms, with a central focus on how authority is distributed throughout the organization (Mintzberg, 1980; Galbraith, 1987). Classic perspectives emphasize that OD entails the continuous alignment of strategy, structure, processes, people, and rewards, treating organizations as information-processing entities (Galbraith, 1974). More recent accounts expand this view by framing OD as a problem-solving system that enables collective action in response to complex and evolving challenges (Ambos and Tatarinov, 2023; Baumann et al., 2024).

Despite these theoretical advances, scholarship remains conceptually fragmented. A wide variety of terms is used to describe similar or overlapping phenomena, contributing to semantic ambiguity in the field. For instance, expressions such as *organizational design*, *organization design*, *organizational structure*, and *organization structure* are frequently employed interchangeably. While some authors use "organizational design" in a broad sense to include structural, procedural, and cultural elements (Baumann and Wu, 2022), others treat it as distinct from narrower constructs like "organizational structure" (Albert, 2023; Gerster et al., 2020; Robertson, 2015).

Moreover, this terminological fluidity is not only observed across different studies, but often within the same publication. Several authors deploy multiple labels in a single work to refer to related design constructs, suggesting that such variation reflects interpretive flexibility rather than inconsistency. This observation reinforces the need for clarity and reflexivity when selecting a conceptual language.

As part of the theoretical grounding of this study, Table 1 provides an illustrative overview of the diversity of terms used in OD literature. This mapping does not aim to establish a fixed

taxonomy, but rather to highlight the coexistence of distinct emphases and the conceptual openness that characterizes the field.

Table 1. Terminological references to OD in the literature (illustrative selection)

Term	*Author(s) (year)*
Design of an organization	Joseph and Gaba (2020) Puranam (2018)
Form of organizing	Burton et al. (2017) Gulati and Puranam (2009) Hunter et al. (2020) Lee and Edmondson (2017) Maurer et al. (2023) Puranam et al. (2014)
Form of organization	Schell and Bischof (2022)
Form of organizational design	Gerster et al. (2020)
Organization design	Albert (2023) Baumann and Wu (2022) Burton (2013) Burton et al. (2015) Clement and Puranam (2018) Eisenman et al. (2020) Fjeldstad and Snow (2018) Galbraith (1974) Gulati and Puranam (2009) Gulati et al. (2012) Hunter et al. (2020) Joseph et al. (2019) Koçak et al. (2023) Lee and Edmondson (2017) Lee et al. (2023) Mueller (2014) Puranam (2018) Puranam et al. (2012) Puranam et al. (2014) Raisch and Birkinshaw (2008) Romme (2019) Teece (2007) Volberda (1996)
Organization model	Hunter et al. (2020) Maurer et al. (2023)
Organization structure	Baumann and Wu (2022) Gulati and Puranam (2009) Hunter et al. (2020) Joseph and Gaba (2020) Martela (2019)

Term	*Author(s) (year)*
Organizational architecture	Nadler and Tushman (1997)
Organizational design	Albert (2023) Baumann and Wu (2022) Eisenman et al. (2020) Fjeldstad and Snow (2018) Gerster et al. (2020) Gulati et al. (2012) Hunter et al. (2020) Lee and Edmondson (2017) Lee et al. (2023) Martela (2019) Mosca et al. (2021) Mueller (2014) Nadler and Tushman (1997) O Reilly and Tushman (2004) Raisch and Birkinshaw (2008) Rivkin and Siggelkow (2003) Robertson (2015) Romme (2019) Schell and Bischof (2022) Tushman and O Reilly (1996)
Organizational form	Billinger and Workiewicz (2019) Burton et al. (2015) Gulati et al. (2012) Joseph and Gaba (2020) Kolbjørnsrud (2018) Martela (2019) O Reilly and Tushman (2013) Schell and Bischof (2022) Volberda (1996)
Organizational hierarchy	Yu, et al. (2019)
Organizational model	Von Zedtwitz (2003)
Organizational structure	Burton et al. (2015) Eisenman et al. (2020) Grinyer and Yasai-Ardekani (1980) Gulati and Puranam (2009) Hunter et al. (2020) Joseph and Gaba (2020) Joseph et al. (2019) Mansfield (1973) Martela (2019) Maurer et al. (2023) Mosca et al. (2021) O Reilly and Tushman (2013) Puranam et al. (2014) Raisch and Birkinshaw (2008)

Term	*Author(s) (year)*
	Romme (2019) Von Zedtwitz (2003)
Organizational system	Lee and Edmondson (2017) Schell and Bischof (2022)
Structure of an organization	Eisenman et al. (2020)
Way of organizing	Martela (2019)

Source: own elaboration

To shed light on the conceptual ambiguity surrounding the field of OD, this study undertook a systematic tracking of the terminology encountered during the literature review. As key contributions were analyzed, particular attention was paid to the labels employed by different authors to describe organizational configurations and design approaches. While not intended as a formal semantic analysis, this iterative mapping process revealed consistent patterns that suggest the existence of several conceptual clusters.

Rather than offering an exhaustive taxonomy, the purpose of this exercise was to illustrate the breadth of terminological variation and its implications for how OD is framed in academic discourse. The diversity of labels reflects distinct emphases, ranging from intentionality and structure to process and logic of organizing, and points to the evolving and contested nature of the field.

Table 2 synthesizes this mapping by grouping the terms into five partially overlapping clusters, each highlighting a different interpretive focus. These categories are not mutually exclusive, and some terms appear across more than one domain. However, their coexistence illustrates the conceptual fluidity of OD and reinforces the importance of terminological clarity when articulating theoretical assumptions and empirical scope.

Table 2. Semantic variation in OD terminology

Conceptual cluster	*Representative terms*	*Underlying logic*
Design-oriented	organizational design, design of an organization, organizational architecture	Emphasize intentionality and the configurational logic behind structural and procedural choices.
Structure-oriented	organizational structure, organization structure, structure of an organization	Refer more narrowly to the formal allocation of roles, responsibilities, and authority within the organization.
Form-oriented	organizational form, form of organizing, form of organization	Highlight the overarching logic or template that defines how an

Conceptual cluster	*Representative terms*	*Underlying logic*
		organization is constituted and operates.
Model-oriented	organization model, organizational model	Tend to frame OD as a coherent conceptual framework or prototype, often used for classification or comparison.
System-oriented	organizational system, way of organizing	Reflect more dynamic or processual views of OD, emphasizing flows, routines, and interdependencies over static structures.

Source: own elaboration

In this study, the term *organizational design* is adopted as the primary conceptual lens, as a pragmatic decision to ensure coherence throughout the analysis. This choice is not intended to privilege one conceptual cluster over others, but rather to offer an inclusive label capable of accommodating the multiple interpretations and semantic variations that characterize the literature.

1.3 Key domains of OD

While the conceptual boundaries of OD remain contested, this study builds on an interpretive synthesis of prior literature and empirical evidence to identify three recurring domains of OD that appear particularly relevant for understanding how organizations arrange their internal functioning: organizational structure, coordination and communication systems, and organizational culture. These domains emerged through a dual process. First, a review of seminal and recent contributions to the OD literature revealed that, despite terminological fragmentation, many frameworks converge, explicitly or implicitly, on these three dimensions as core loci of design intervention (Galbraith, 1974; Mintzberg, 1980; Burton et al., 2017; Romme, 2019). Second, inductive analysis of the empirical material confirmed the salience of these areas, as participants consistently referred to changes in authority distribution, modes of collaboration, and shared values when describing their organizational models. The convergence between theory and data thus provided both conceptual grounding and empirical validation for the use of these three domains as an organizing lens in this study.

This configuration does not aim to provide a definitive or exhaustive taxonomy. Rather, it reflects patterns recurrently emphasized in classical and contemporary OD scholarship (Galbraith, 1974; Mintzberg, 1979; Burton et al., 2006) and echoed in the empirical material

gathered throughout this research. The resulting framework functions as a sensitizing device (Blumer, 1954), grounded in abductive reasoning and sustained empirical engagement.

The following table presents an illustrative set of elements associated with each of these three domains. It is not meant as a definitive and exhaustive taxonomy, but rather as a heuristic tool to inform the empirical analysis of OD.

Table 3. Illustrative elements associated with the key domains of OD

OD key domain	*Elements*
Organizational structure	Hierarchical configuration
	(De)centralization of authority
	Formal structures
	Informal structures
	Organizational boundaries
	Scalability mechanisms
	Static / fluid structures
	Task and role allocation
Coordination and communication systems	Decision-making systems
	Conflict resolution protocols
	Digital coordination tools
	Feedback loops
	Governance models
	Information sharing mechanisms
	Role clarity frameworks
	Synchronization practices
Organizational culture	Shared values and purpose
	Cultural onboarding
	Emotional and relational climate
	Language and symbols
	Norms of autonomy and accountability
	Psychological safety
	Rituals and routines
	Storytelling and collective memory
	Tolerance for experimentation

Source: own elaboration

Organizational structure refers to the configuration of roles, responsibilities, authority relationships, and governance mechanisms through which organizations divide labor and coordinate activity. It represents a foundational dimension of OD, determining how tasks are distributed, decisions are made, and accountability is maintained (Lawrence and Lorsch, 1967; Mintzberg, 1979; Burton et al., 2002).

Traditionally, structure has been conceptualized as a formal and hierarchical system, intended to ensure efficiency and control through clear reporting relationships and defined job roles (Weber, 1978; Chandler, 1962). However, contemporary perspectives emphasize that organizational structures are multifaceted, incorporating not only formal systems but also emergent, informal configurations that shape how work is conducted (Krackhardt and Hanson, 1993; Gulati and Puranam, 2009).

Key aspects that illuminate the design and function of organizational structure include:

i. Formal organizational hierarchies and reporting lines: Often visualized through organizational charts, these define the vertical allocation of authority and delineate the official chains of command and decision rights. These formal depictions also signal career paths, power asymmetries, and status distinctions within the firm (Chandler, 1962; Galbraith, 1974; Baron and Bielby, 1980).
ii. Legal and positional architecture: The legal form of the organization (e.g., cooperative, benefit corporation), foundation) and the formal definition of job positions (titles, descriptions, status) condition how authority and responsibility are distributed (Weber, 1978; Mair et al., 2012). These formal attributes are often accompanied by symbolic privileges or access to resources based on positional placement.
iii. Informal structures: Unwritten norms, interpersonal ties, and informal networks play a critical role in shaping how work actually flows across the organization. These structures can either reinforce or subvert formal hierarchies, and they are especially salient in contexts of high uncertainty or where tacit knowledge is key (Krackhardt and Hanson, 1993; Clement and Puranam, 2018).
iv. Task distribution mechanisms: The way in which organizations segment work across functional, divisional, matrix, or project-based logics determines how knowledge is aggregated, how collaboration unfolds, and how responsibilities are monitored (Mintzberg, 1979; Nadler and Tushman, 1997).
v. Centralization versus decentralization: The locus of decision-making authority, whether concentrated at the top or distributed throughout the organization, has significant implications for autonomy, innovation, and responsiveness. Decentralized structures are particularly relevant in turbulent or knowledge-intensive environments (Foss, 2003; Alexy, 2022).

Taken together, these elements highlight the multidimensional nature of organizational structure. Rather than a static blueprint, structure should be seen as a dynamic configuration resulting from the interplay between formalized arrangements and emergent social dynamics. Its efficacy is contingent upon its internal coherence and its alignment with the broader coordination and cultural systems that support collective functioning.

Coordination and communication systems constitute the connective tissue of OD, enabling dispersed individuals and units to align their activities, share information, and respond effectively to interdependencies. These systems determine not only how efficiently organizations operate, but also how flexibly they adapt to change (Galbraith, 1974; Joseph and Gaba, 2020).

As organizations adopt flatter structures and distributed forms of authority, coordination mechanisms become increasingly central to sustaining coherence and enabling decision-making. However, as Joseph and Sengul (2024) point out, coordination remains a conceptually underdeveloped yet practically vital area within OD. They call for deeper theorization of coordination architectures, defined as the deliberate combination of routines, roles, and tools that align distributed actors, particularly in fluid and adaptive environments.

Building on both classical and contemporary literature, this study identifies several elements that shape the operation of coordination and communication systems in organizations. These include:

i. Decision-making processes: The degree of centralization in decision rights affects organizational agility and responsiveness. In post-bureaucratic settings, decision-making authority is often distributed closer to the point of action, requiring support systems that ensure consistency and accountability (Lee and Edmondson, 2017; Robertson, 2015).
ii. Information provision: The transparency, timeliness, and accuracy of information flows determine how effectively organizational members can make decisions and align around shared goals. Transparency and self-service access to information mitigate asymmetries and reduce reliance on gatekeeping roles (Baumann and Wu, 2022).
iii. Knowledge management and flows: The generation, storage, and distribution of knowledge, particularly in knowledge-intensive environments, are critical to

performance. These flows are facilitated through platforms, cross-functional structures, and institutionalized learning routines (Grant, 1996; Nonaka, 1994; Tsoukas, 2005).

iv. Communication channels: Formal mechanisms (e.g., dashboards, reports, intranet systems) and informal interactions (e.g., chats, spontaneous conversations) both contribute to organizational alignment. Their effectiveness depends on organizational norms around openness and the permeability of internal boundaries (Krackhardt and Hanson, 1993).

v. Information infrastructure: Technological systems, such as collaborative platforms, CRMs, or knowledge repositories, play an increasingly prominent role in shaping workflow integration and real-time responsiveness (Zammuto et al., 2007; Yoo et al., 2010).

vi. Mutual adjustment mechanisms: In settings where interdependence is high and standardization is insufficient, liaison roles, boundary spanners, and integrative structures (e.g., cross-functional teams, task forces, coordinators or project managers, etc.) are necessary to align actors across organizational boundaries (Mintzberg, 1979; Burton et al., 2006).

vii. Standardization versus flexibility: Coordination design often involves trade-offs between procedural formalization and adaptability. While standardization increases predictability in routine operations, flexibility enables creativity and responsiveness in novel or ambiguous situations (Volberda, 1996; Raisch and Birkinshaw, 2008).

These elements reflect the operational logic of the organization. Effective coordination and communication systems foster shared situational awareness, reduce friction across units, and support distributed decision-making.

Organizational culture constitutes a key domain of OD, shaping the shared values, norms, and assumptions that guide meaning-making and behavior within firms (Schein, 2010; Hatch, 1993). While often treated as a distinct domain of organizational analysis, culture is increasingly recognized as a central design element that operates in conjunction with formal structures and coordination mechanisms (Burton et al., 2017; Romme, 2019). It provides an interpretive context through which employees understand their roles, relationships, and expectations, thereby influencing both strategic alignment and everyday practices.

A common distinction in the literature on organizational culture is that between espoused values, typically promoted by leaders as aspirational statements, and enacted values, which

manifest in actual practices and informal routines (Argyris and Schön, 1978; Schein, 2010). The latter are particularly relevant for design purposes, as they shape the "cultural infrastructure" that supports or undermines formal governance structures (Gulati and Puranam, 2009). For instance, a culture of psychological safety may enable decentralized decision-making to flourish, whereas high power-distance norms may inhibit participatory governance regardless of formal structures (Edmondson, 1999; Hofstede, 2001).

Cultural attributes also play a key role in sustaining organizational coherence under conditions of complexity and distributed authority. Shared norms regarding trust, transparency, mutual respect, and learning orientation often serve to replace the control functions traditionally performed by supervisory roles or hierarchical reporting lines (Bernstein et al., 2016; Laloux, 2015).

Importantly, organizational culture is not monolithic. It is enacted and negotiated through micro-interactions, socialization practices, and symbolic artefacts (Trice and Beyer, 1993; Pratt and Rafaeli, 1997). Thus, the design of culture is not merely a matter of top-down imposition but entails cultivating rituals, narratives, and feedback mechanisms that align with broader organizational purposes (Hatch and Schultz, 2002).

Recent systematic reviews confirm that organizational culture remains a complex and multifaceted construct, characterized by fragmented theoretical models, diverse measurement approaches, and heterogeneous empirical applications (Bogale and Debela, 2024). Despite the proliferation of frameworks, no single paradigm has achieved theoretical convergence. This ongoing conceptual fragmentation underscores the importance of treating culture not as a static set of values and their subsequent patterned behaviors, but as a dynamic infrastructure of meaning that conditions how design choices are interpreted, enacted, and sustained (Gulati and Puranam, 2009). In light of this, and considering how scholarship has acknowledged the interpretive depth and integrative function that culture provides within organizational life, its inclusion as one of the three key areas of OD in this study is both reasonable and analytically justified. As such, organisational culture must be actively considered in any effort to understand or engineer organizational functioning, particularly in contexts characterized by flattened hierarchies, fluid roles, and distributed decision-making authority.

Organizational structure, coordination and communication systems, and organizational culture is generally understood as deeply interdependent elements of a broader systemic

configuration. Treating these domains in isolation risks overlooking the dynamic complementarities and tensions that arise when design choices in one domain cascade into others (Burton et al., 2006; Galbraith, 1974; Nadler and Tushman, 1997).

As Joseph and Gaba (2020) emphasize, decisions regarding structural arrangements, such as levels of hierarchy or task distribution, are not neutral but profoundly shape the requirements for coordination mechanisms and the emergence of cultural norms. For example, flatter or decentralized organizational structures often rely on distributed decision-making and real-time knowledge sharing, which necessitate robust coordination systems and a culture that fosters psychological safety and mutual trust (Lee and Edmondson, 2017; Edmondson, 1999). Conversely, centralized hierarchies may constrain the flow of informal communication or suppress culturally embedded learning practices, thereby generating misalignment between formal structure and informal dynamics (Krackhardt and Hanson, 1993; Gulati and Puranam, 2009).

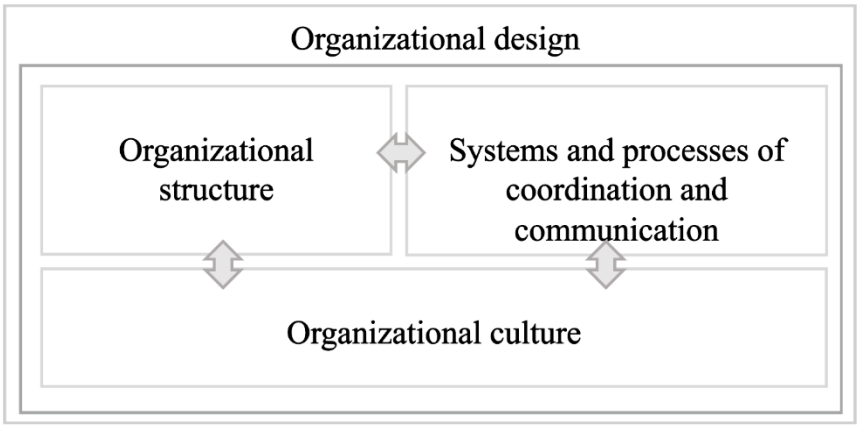
Recent literature on organizational congruence underscores that high-performing organizations tend to exhibit strong internal consistency among their design elements (Tushman and O Reilly, 1996; Burton et al., 2017). Alignment among structure, coordination, and culture enhances an organization's capacity to respond to environmental complexity, reduce friction in execution, and maintain strategic coherence (Raisch and Birkinshaw, 2008; Romme, 2019). In contrast, misalignments, such as decentralized teams operating within rigid reporting lines or agile workflows embedded in risk-averse cultures, can produce coordination breakdowns, motivational deficits, or strategic drift (Foss and Klein, 2022).

Furthermore, the interplay between these components is not static but evolves over time as organizations adapt to internal and external pressures. As Puranam et al. (2014) argue, design choices should be seen as iterative solutions to recurring organizational problems, such as how to allocate tasks, govern behaviour, and transmit information. These solutions must remain internally coherent, particularly under conditions of turbulence or transformation (Ambos and Tatarinov, 2023).

Therefore, achieving effective OD requires attention not only to the functionality of individual components but also to the quality of their integration. Design coherence involves ensuring that formal structures facilitate, rather than obstruct, communication processes, that cultural norms are reinforced by governance systems, and that the distribution of authority aligns with both

the strategic goals and the operational realities of the organization. Figure 1 provides a visual representation of this integrative perspective, illustrating the recursive and mutually constitutive relationships among the three foundational components of OD.

Figure 1: Dynamic relationships among OD core domains



Source: own elaboration

1.4 Evolution and expansion of the conceptualization of OD

The conceptual evolution of OD reflects an ongoing effort to respond to the increasing complexity, dynamism, and diversity of organizational forms in contemporary settings. Early contributions to the field emphasized structural alignment as the foundation for effective performance. While Nadler and Tushman's (1997) congruence model categorized OD into structural linkages, work processes, and grouping mechanisms, proposing that alignment across these domains enhances organizational performance, Rivkin and Siggelkow (2003) expanded this view by conceptualizing organizations as complex systems in which hierarchical arrangements, incentive structures, and patterns of interaction must be coordinated to enable coherent decision-making and strategic alignment.

A more abstract and functional approach was introduced a decade ago by Puranam et al. (2012; 2014), who identified five fundamental organizing problems that all organizations must solve: task division, task allocation, reward distribution, information dissemination, and governance. Their framework marks a shift away from structural templates toward a design logic focused on problem-solving capabilities and interdependencies among organizational elements.

Concurrently, the field has increasingly drawn on insights from adjacent research domains. One notable expansion is the integration of individual-level agency and distributed cognition into design frameworks. As knowledge work becomes more central to organizational effectiveness, the role of individuals and teams in enacting, adapting, and contesting design choices has gained analytical importance (Felin et al., 2012; Choudhury et al., 2020). These micro-foundations highlight how organizational arrangements both shape and are shaped by individual action.

Technological change has long been a major driver of innovation in OD. The proliferation of digital tools, remote collaboration platforms, and algorithmic coordination mechanisms has reshaped how organizations allocate tasks, share knowledge, and manage performance (Zammuto et al., 2007; Yoo et al., 2010). These technologies enable real-time coordination and reconfigurable structures, reinforcing the shift from stable hierarchies to adaptive systems (Volberda, 1996; Burton et al., 2006). Recent developments such as generative AI and advanced information-processing systems further extend this transformation by altering spans of control, embedding algorithmic oversight, and reshaping coordination patterns across distributed teams (Gibbs and Van der Stede, 2025; Xu et al., 2025). Rather than exerting uniform effects, these technologies interact with OD contingently, influencing centralization, accountability, and interdependence in context-sensitive ways.

A further area of expansion involves the increasing relevance of network-based organizing principles. Contemporary organizations often operate as nodes in larger systems of value creation, such as inter-organizational ecosystems, collaborative platforms, or meta-organizations (Gulati et al., 2012; Fjeldstad et al., 2012). These distributed forms challenge traditional assumptions of boundedness, authority, and control, requiring new models of coordination, legitimacy, and mutual adaptation.

Taken together, these developments suggest that OD is no longer confined to static structural arrangements within single firms. Instead, it encompasses a broader and more fluid conceptual space that integrates formal and informal mechanisms, individual and collective agency, and intra- and inter-organizational dynamics. As such, OD is increasingly understood as a dynamic, contingent, and multi-level phenomenon.

This reconceptualization of OD naturally leads to a reconsideration of organizational boundaries: how they are defined, challenged, and redrawn in contemporary contexts.

1.5 Contemporary perspectives on organizational boundaries and its impact on OD

Recent scholarship on OD has highlighted the erosion and reconfiguration of traditional organizational boundaries in response to changing technological, institutional, and market environments. The term “new forms of organizing” has been used to describe departures from hierarchical, functionally siloed structures toward more decentralized, networked, and participatory configurations (Ashkenas et al., 1995; Gulati et al., 2012). These emergent forms emphasize flexibility, responsiveness, and lateral collaboration, and they often operate through loosely coupled systems of authority and influence rather than formal hierarchies.

One major implication of this shift is the expansion of OD beyond the boundaries of a single firm. Increasingly, OD must account for supra-firm architectures such as ecosystems, platforms, and alliances, where interdependence among legally autonomous entities becomes central to value creation (Burton, 2013; Kolbjørnsrud, 2018; Jacobides et al., 2018). In such contexts, governance, coordination, and control mechanisms operate across organizational borders, often without formal authority structures.

Meta-organizations, defined as organizations composed of other, sometimes nested, organizations, further illustrate this expansion of the OD domain (Ahrne and Brunsson, 2005). These entities function through voluntary cooperation, negotiated rules, and shared norms, rather than centralized command. As such, they pose new challenges for OD, including how to ensure coherence and accountability in the absence of hierarchical integration.

The growing relevance of open innovation networks, agile methodologies, and cross-sector collaborations also reflects the blurring of organizational boundaries (Chesbrough, 2003; Denning, 2018). These models emphasize permeability, interaction, and dynamic configuration, requiring OD scholars to consider how organizations manage knowledge flows, shared identity, and distributed governance.

In sum, contemporary OD must grapple with the complex reality of nested and overlapping organizational structures, where authority, identity, and decision-making are increasingly distributed across fluid and porous boundaries. This multi-level understanding of design broadens the scope of analysis from internal alignment to systemic adaptability and from isolated entities to interdependent constellations of actors.

Figure 2 illustrates the layered and multi-scalar nature of OD, situating its constitutive elements across interrelated levels of analysis from intra-organizational practices to supra-organizational configurations. While the primary analytical focus of this study is the organizational level, certain intra-organizational dynamics, such as informal networks and decision-making autonomy, are also considered insofar as they shape or reflect core design features in the cases analyzed.

Figure 2: Analytical layers of OD: from intra- to supra-organizational perspectives

Source: own elaboration

1.6 Definition of OD for this study

As explained in Section 1.3, the conceptualization of OD has revolved around the identification of three interrelated components: organizational structure, coordination and communication systems, and organizational culture (Burton et al., 2006; Galbraith, 1974; Nadler and Tushman, 1997). These areas reflect the core domains through which organizations shape internal functioning and respond to design challenges. For these reasons and for the purpose of this study, OD is, therefore, understood as the intentional configuration of structural, coordinative, and cultural elements that facilitate strategic alignment and support collective action.

This working definition and corresponding configurational elements include, but is not limited to, the allocation of decision-making authority, the formal and informal structuring of roles and

relationships, the coordination and communication systems that support information flows and task integration, and the cultural norms and shared values that underpin organizational behavior (Galbraith, 1974; Burton et al., 2017; Gulati et al., 2012).

The definition employed here reflects an integrative and dynamic conception of OD, moving beyond static notions of organizational charts or structural templates. Consistent with recent scholarship (Puranam et al., 2014; Ambos and Tatarinov, 2023), this study views organizations as problem-solving systems in which design choices influence the organization's capacity to adapt, innovate, and sustain performance under conditions of complexity and change.

This research adopts an intra-organizational and holistic perspective on OD, in contrast to studies that focus on inter-organizational architectures such as ecosystems or meta-organizations (Burton, 2013; Kolbjørnsrud, 2018). The unit of analysis is the organization as a whole, with particular emphasis on internal mechanisms of coordination, governance, and cultural integration (Lee and Edmondson, 2017). This focus is especially relevant for understanding organizations that challenge traditional bureaucratic templates, often by adopting flatter hierarchies, distributed authority, and participatory governance models.

By framing OD in this way, the study provides an analytical lens through which to examine both the structural design features and the underlying logics that govern emerging organizational forms. It enables an assessment not only of what design elements are present, but also of how they interact to support organizational purpose, accommodate contextual constraints, and mediate key trade-offs, such as between autonomy and alignment, flexibility and stability, or innovation and efficiency (Romme, 2019; Foss and Klein, 2012).

1.7 Unconventional OD

As discussed in previous sections, the field of OD is marked by a persistent lack of terminological consensus. This ambiguity becomes especially pronounced when describing organizational forms that diverge from conventional hierarchical designs. Across the literature, such configurations have been labelled in diverse ways—including new organizational forms (Fjeldstad and Snow, 2018; Kolbjørnsrud, 2018), new forms of organizing (Lee and Edmondson, 2017; Billinger and Workiewicz, 2019), and alternative organizing structures (Martela, 2019). This semantic variability reflects not only the intellectual dynamism of the field but also the analytical challenges of capturing emerging organizational realities that often transcend established taxonomies (Puranam et al., 2014).

Table 4 provides a non-exhaustive overview of the terminology employed to describe such configurations. Terms such as self-managing organizations (Maurer et al., 2023), unorthodox organizational forms (Billinger and Workiewicz, 2019), and others illustrate the proliferation of conceptual labels seeking to characterize agility, decentralization, and purpose-driven governance. However, despite their shared emphasis on these design features, these labels remain analytically fragmented. This proliferation underscores the need for integrative frameworks that can synthesize insights across diverse perspectives while remaining sensitive to empirical nuances (Romme, 2019; Schell and Bischof, 2022).

Table 4. Terms associated with unconventional OD

Term	*Author(s) (year)*
Agile forms of organizational design	Gerster et al. (2020)
Alternative organizational form	Joseph et al. (2019)
Alternative organizing structure	Martela (2019)
Communities	Joseph et al. (2019)
Ecosystems	Joseph et al. (2019)
Emancipatory organizational structures	Martela (2019)
Hybrid organizationl structures	O Reilly and Tushman (2013)
New forms of organizing	Maurer et al. (2023)
New form of organization	Billinger and Workiewicz (2019)
New form of organizational design	Schell and Bischof (2022)
New organizational design	Romme (2019)
New organizational form	Fjeldstad and Snow (2018) Joseph et al. (2019) Joseph and Gaba (2020) Kolbjørnsrud (2018) Romme (2019)
New organizational system	Schell and Bischof (2022)
New ways of organizing	Martela (2019)
New/Emerging forms of organizing	Billinger and Workiewicz (2019) Leih et al. (2015) Lee and Edmondson (2017) Puranam et al. (2014)
Novel organizational form	Baumann and Wu (2022) Billinger and Workiewicz (2019)
Novel organizational structure	Martela (2019)
Unorthodox organizational form	Billinger and Workiewicz (2019)

Term	*Author(s) (year)*
New collaborative organizational forms	Fjeldstad et al. (2012)
Platforms	Joseph et al. (2019)
Self-organizing	Martela (2019)
Self-managing (form of organizing / organization)	Maurer et al. (2023)

Source: own elaboration

The present research focuses on OD models that intentionally depart from traditional top-down hierarchies, privileging decentralization, self-management, and low-bureaucracy configurations (Billinger and Workiewicz, 2019). These models typically grant substantial autonomy to employees, encouraging discretion over task execution and decision-making. Importantly, such practices are not a contemporary invention; they are rooted in a long-standing scholarly and managerial quest to reconcile autonomy with coordination, as seen in the foundational works of Weber (1954) and Chandler (1962) on bureaucratic versus organic forms of organizing.

While the above terms differ in emphasis, they converge in describing organizational arrangements that intentionally challenge conventional bureaucratic assumptions, particularly regarding hierarchy, formalization, and centralized control. In this study, the term *unconventional OD* is used as an umbrella category to denote design configurations that promote autonomy, distributed authority, and emergent coordination mechanisms. These features are not presented as normative ideals, but as empirical patterns observed in organizations seeking to operate beyond traditional design constraints.

Building on the previous discussion of terminological ambiguity, this section narrows the focus to a specific subset of OD configurations that intentionally depart from traditional organizational templates

Key models of unconventional OD

The literature identifies a diverse and expanding repertoire of unconventional OD models. Among the most salient are **self-managed organizations** (SMOs), which challenge traditional supervisory hierarchies by decentralizing authority and often eliminating middle management altogether (Lee and Edmondson, 2017). Although the theoretical foundations of self-managed teams trace back to the socio-technical systems approach of the 1950s (Trist and Bamforth, 1951), their contemporary relevance has been amplified by increasing demands for agility,

knowledge-intensive work, and employee empowerment (Bernstein et al., 2016; Martela, 2019).

Within the broader SMO paradigm, specific governance models such as sociocracy and holacracy have gained scholarly and practical traction. **Sociocracy**, originally developed by Endenburg (1988), rests on principles of equivalence, consent-based decision-making, and transparent communication. It aims to establish adaptive, circular hierarchies that enhance collective intelligence and distributed leadership (Buck and Endenburg, 2012). In contrast, **holacracy**, as articulated by Robertson (2015), replaces fixed job descriptions with fluid roles and adopts a constitution-based operating model. It fosters decentralized authority, self-leadership, and frequent role redefinition to match evolving organizational needs (Amundsen and Martinsen, 2015; Lee and Edmondson, 2017).

Another influential approach is embodied in the concept of **teal organizations**, popularized by Laloux (2015). Teal models advocate for self-management, psychological wholeness, and evolutionary purpose as central design principles. While Laloux's work offers an evocative vision of human-centered organizing, its intellectual roots can be traced to earlier contributions on participatory management and continuous improvement (Deming, 1986; Drucker, 1999). Teal organizations promote mentorship over supervision, task-adapted structures over rigid hierarchies, and intrinsic motivation over extrinsic control.

Although these models differ in terminology and emphasis, they share a commitment to reconfiguring authority, enhancing participation, and embedding trust-based coordination mechanisms. They also frequently appear in hybridized forms, combining elements from multiple frameworks depending on the organization's context and evolution (Martela, 2020). This hybridity highlights the importance of studying such models empirically, in situ, to capture their operational dynamics beyond normative prescriptions.

Moreover, beyond these prominent models (self-managed organizations, sociocracy, holacracy, and teal organizations), a broader repertoire of alternative organization designs has been examined in scholarly literature. While some of these models originate in academic theorizing, others stem from practitioner-driven innovations that have subsequently attracted scholarly attention. These approaches vary in their conceptual foundations, coordination mechanisms, and degrees of formalization, yet they share a common emphasis on adaptability, distributed authority, and the reconfiguration of traditional managerial roles. The following

table summarizes key terms used in academic and practitioner literature to refer to unconventional organization designs, along with their primary sources and a brief description of each model's distinctive features.

Table 5. Overview of unconventional OD models

Term	*Source / Key proponents (year)*	*Brief description*
Adhocracy	Mintzberg (1979)	Highly flexible, project-based structure designed for solving complex, non-routine problems.
Ambidextrous organization	Tushman and O Reilly (1996)	Design enabling simultaneous exploitation and exploration through dual structures or contexts.
Boundaryless organization	Ashkenas et al. (1995)	Eliminates vertical, horizontal, and external boundaries to promote agility and cross-functional collaboration.
Chaordic organization	Hock (1999)	Blends chaos and order with decentralized self-organization and minimal rules guided by shared purpose.
Heterarchy	Stark (2001)	Organizing principles with multiple coexisting hierarchies and lateral accountability, promoting flexibility and innovation.
Holacracy	Robertson (2015)	A governance system distributing authority via self-organizing teams ('circles'), replacing traditional management hierarchies.
Holonic organization	Koestler (1967)	Nested hierarchy of semi-autonomous 'holons' that are both parts and wholes of the larger system.
Modular organization	Schilling and Steensma (2001)	Composed of interchangeable, outsourced modules coordinated by a central hub.
Network organization	Powell (1990)	A form of collaboration among independent actors coordinated by trust and reciprocity, not hierarchy.
Organic organization	Burns and Stalker (1961)	Flexible, informal, adaptive structures suited for dynamic environments; decision-making based on expertise.
Organizational democracy	Harrison and Freeman (2004)	Ongoing, institutionalized employee participation in governance through democratic decision-making.

Term	*Source / Key proponents (year)*	*Brief description*
Post-bureaucratic organization	Heckscher (1994)	Flatter, decentralized forms relying on networks and informal coordination beyond Weberian bureaucracy.
Self-managing organization	Lee and Edmondson (2017)	Radically decentralized organizations without managers; authority and decision rights are broadly distributed.
Sociocracy	Endenburg (1988)	Consent-based governance model using linked circles and double-linking for decentralized decision-making.
Spaghetti organization	Strebel and Rogers (2005)	Informal, project-based structure with no fixed roles or hierarchy; dynamic and self-initiated collaboration.
Teal organization	Laloux (2015)	An evolutionary stage of organization characterized by self-management, wholeness, and evolutionary purpose; emphasizes distributed authority and collective purpose.

Source: own elaboration

Defining "unconventional organizational design"

To ensure greater conceptual precision and consistency, this study adopts the term unconventional OD as an overarching designation for these models that depart from conventional forms of organizing. We intentionally avoid terms such as new or non-traditional, as they imply novelty without acknowledging the historical continuity of experimentation in organizing. Rather, the term unconventional captures the field's evolutionary nature, where established forms are reconfigured in response to changing technological, social, and strategic conditions (Billinger and Workiewicz, 2019).

Unconventional OD, as defined in this study, refers to the deliberate structuring of organizations around decentralized authority, reduced hierarchy, participatory governance, and cultural mechanisms that emphasize autonomy, transparency, and collective purpose. While these models address the universal organizing challenges identified by Puranam et al. (2014), namely, task division, allocation, reward systems, information dissemination, and governance, they diverge from traditional OD by relying less on formalized control structures and more on informal, emergent, or distributed mechanisms.

In this study, the focus is placed on internal design elements, specifically those that influence how authority, decision-making, coordination, and culture are arranged and experienced within

organizational boundaries. This delimitation aims to facilitate the identification of recurring features in unconventional OD and to explore how these elements interact in practice across different organizational settings.

1.8 The need for a holistic empirical approach

Despite the increasing interest in alternative organizing models, empirical research on unconventional OD remains fragmented and often narrow in scope. Much of the existing literature tends to focus on specific typologies or idealized models evaluating their internal structure, decision-making processes, or cultural dynamics in isolation (Lee and Edmondson, 2017; Livijn, 2019; Martela, 2019). While such studies have contributed valuable insights, they often fall short of capturing the systemic interplay among design dimensions across different organizational contexts.

In practice, however, few organizations implement "pure" OD models that fully align with theoretical archetypes. Instead, firms typically adopt hybridized forms, selectively integrating features from multiple models to meet evolving strategic and operational needs (Martela, 2020; Fjeldstad and Snow, 2018). These emergent forms challenge the notion of prescriptive conventional design and underpin the need for empirical research that moves beyond typological boundaries to examine unconventional OD as a dynamic and adaptive phenomenon.

Furthermore, the academic discourse surrounding OD is frequently polarized. On one end of the spectrum, scholars advocate for decentralized, participatory, and trust-based models that promote agility, creativity, and employee empowerment (Dessein and Santos, 2006; Hamel, 2011; Gerster et al., 2020; Moreno et al., 2020). On the other, proponents of hierarchical structures emphasize the benefits of formal authority, specialization, and efficiency in managing complexity and scale (Garicano, 2000; Garicano and Hubbard, 2016; Yang and Zhang, 2019). While both perspectives offer compelling arguments, relatively few studies adopt an integrative stance that examines how autonomy and control, flexibility and coherence, or experimentation and stability might be reconciled within unconventional OD settings (Joseph and Gaba, 2020; Puranam et al., 2014).

This study seeks to address these gaps by adopting a holistic, exploratory, and empirically grounded approach. Rather than evaluating a single model or testing a predefined framework,

we investigate how unconventional OD manifests across five organizational cases, each operating under different constraints and sectoral conditions. Through comparative analysis, we aim to identify recurrent components that characterize these designs, as well as the relationships, tensions, and trade-offs that shape their implementation.

By adopting a multi-case study design, this research contributes to theory-building in OD by offering an empirically derived framework grounded in real-world organizational practices (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007; Yin, 2017). It also responds to recent scholarly calls for more nuanced, context-sensitive, and inductive research on organizational forms that defy traditional assumptions (Foss and Klein, 2022; Heusinkveld and Smits, 2025). Ultimately, this study provides a conceptual bridge between the theoretical fragmentation and the pragmatic hybridity that characterizes the field of OD today.

1.9 Conclusions

This chapter has provided a comprehensive review of the theoretical landscape surrounding OD, offering a structured and critical account of its foundational concepts, historical evolution, and emerging trajectories. It has demonstrated that OD is a multidimensional and dynamic construct, encompassing formal structures, coordination mechanisms, and cultural systems that collectively shape organizational functioning.

The review began by tracing the conceptual origins of OD and highlighting the proliferation of terms and perspectives that have emerged over time. While early approaches emphasized structural alignment and control, more recent scholarship has reconceptualized OD as a problem-solving architecture that facilitates adaptability, innovation, and collective action. This evolution reflects not only theoretical refinements but also the changing demands faced by contemporary organizations operating under conditions of volatility, complexity, and technological transformation.

A central contribution of the chapter lies in its articulation of the three elements of OD: organizational structure, coordination and communication systems, and organizational culture, and their interdependence. Rather than treating these elements as discrete, the chapter underscores their systemic integration, drawing attention to the need for internal coherence and contextual alignment in effective OD.

Building on this foundation, the chapter examined the expansion of OD theory to accommodate distributed forms of organizing, including ecosystems, platforms, and meta-organizations. This analytical shift necessitates a reconsideration of organizational boundaries and a broader, more fluid understanding of authority, identity, and coordination.

The chapter then turned to the growing academic interest in organizational configurations that intentionally depart from traditional bureaucratic forms. These unconventional ODs have been variably labelled in the literature and remain under-theorized as a phenomenon. By synthesizing the key models, the chapter has outlined its defining features and theoretical antecedents, while also acknowledging its empirical hybridity and conceptual ambiguity.

Finally, the chapter established the intellectual and empirical rationale for this study. Despite the proliferation of work on individual models, few studies have sought to identify the underlying components that consistently characterize unconventional OD across organizational contexts. Furthermore, literature remains divided between advocates of decentralization and defenders of hierarchy, with limited integrative work bridging these paradigms.

In response, this thesis adopts an exploratory, inductive, and multi-case research design to investigate unconventional OD as a holistic phenomenon. The subsequent empirical chapters aim to uncover the core design dimensions that recur across diverse organizational settings, as well as the trade-offs and tensions that arise in their implementation. In doing so, the study seeks to contribute to a more coherent, empirically grounded understanding of how organizations are reimagining their structures, processes, and cultural foundations beyond the conventional template.

Chapter 2. Research methodology

2.1 Introduction

While the previous sections outlined the theoretical base and research context, this chapter concentrates solely on the methodological approach to this study. Designed to provide a background and detailed insight to the empirical fieldwork conducted, this chapter serves to outline all aspects of data collection and analysis, including the rationale for the research design, selection of research tools and subsequent development and application of these tools, in addition to highlighting the challenges and obstacles which were confronted.

2.2 Research philosophy

In approaching this research, it is important to clarify the philosophical assumptions that underpin the study, as they ultimately shape the formulation of research questions, the selection of methods, and the interpretation of empirical material (Creswell, 2013; Saunders et al., 2012). Research philosophy concerns the development of knowledge and the nature of that knowledge, as well as the way in which the researcher views and engages with the world. This study is grounded in an interpretivist tradition, which emphasizes the social construction of meaning.

To fully articulate the philosophical underpinnings of this approach, it is necessary to briefly outline the epistemological orientation that informs the design and implementation of the study. This research adopts a interpretivist epistemological stance, grounded in the belief that organizational realities are not objective entities waiting to be discovered but are socially constructed through the meanings and practices of actors. Rather than aiming to reveal a singular or external “truth” about OD, the study seeks to understand how individuals within organizations experience, interpret, and enact unconventional design principles in contextually situated ways. Knowledge is thus understood as emergent, negotiated, and inherently shaped by the interaction between the researcher and the researched phenomenon (Schwandt, 1994; Guba and Lincoln, 1994). This epistemological orientation informs both the abductive logic that guided the research process and the choice of a qualitative, multi-case study design, privileged depth, plurality of voices, and contextual sensitivity over universal generalization.

2.3 Methodological approach

Before implementing the research strategy, it was necessary to reflect on the underlying philosophical assumptions, paradigmatic orientations, and corresponding methodological implications that would guide the study. As several scholars have argued, methodological coherence requires that the research questions, approach, and data collection techniques be logically and epistemologically aligned (Edmondson and McManus, 2007; Creswell, 2013; Saunders et al., 2012). Rather than being a linear or prescriptive exercise, this alignment is understood as a dynamic and iterative process shaped by the nature of the phenomenon and the researcher's interpretive stance.

This research is rooted in an interpretivist and constructivist tradition, which assumes that organizational realities are socially constructed, historically embedded, and context-dependent. Within this perspective, knowledge is not discovered but co-constructed through interactions between researchers and participants (Guba and Lincoln, 1994; Schwandt, 1994). Accordingly, this study seeks to explore how individuals within organizations understand, enact, and make sense of unconventional ODs, privileging subjective experiences, local meanings, and situated practices.

In line with this philosophical orientation, a multiple case study design was adopted to investigate how unconventional OD is enacted in practice. Case study methodology is particularly suited to exploring complex and emergent organizational phenomena, allowing for a detailed and context-sensitive examination of multiple instantiations of the same theoretical construct (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2017; Welch et al., 2020). This approach is not intended to test hypotheses or produce statistically generalizable results, but rather to develop empirically grounded insights that are analytically transferable to similar contexts (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

While the broader OD literature includes multiple levels of analysis, ranging from intra-organizational teams to supra-firm ecosystems (Burton, 2013; Kolbjørnsrud, 2018), this study is deliberately positioned at the organizational level. It focuses on how entire firms configure their internal structures, coordination mechanisms, and cultural practices in ways that depart from traditional hierarchies. Inter-organizational dynamics, while relevant, fall outside the scope of this investigation. This organizational-level focus allows for a deeper understanding

of the internal logics and trade-offs associated with unconventional OD practices (Lee and Edmondson, 2017).

2.4 Research strategy

The exploratory nature of this study called for a qualitative multiple case study design, enabling in-depth engagement with unconventional organizational forms as they are enacted in real-world contexts (Eisenhardt, 1989; Welch et al., 2020). This methodological choice is particularly appropriate for investigating emergent organizational arrangements that challenge established theoretical assumptions, as it allows for a contextualized and fine-grained analysis of organizational logics, practices, and design tensions.

Our research strategy follows an abductive logic of inquiry, combining inductive theory-building with an iterative interplay between empirical observations and conceptual development (Dubois and Gadde, 2002; Gioia et al., 2013). The use of a multiple case study format supported both replication logic and variation logic (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007), enabling the identification of recurring interpretive patterns while also accounting for organizational heterogeneity. Case selection was guided by a maximum variation strategy to ensure theoretical breadth and relevance.

To support interpretive rigor, we adopted a cross-case comparison approach that allowed us to refine emerging conceptual categories through iterative engagement with similarities, contrasts, and patterns across the cases. Rather than seeking statistical generalizability, our objective was to generate context-sensitive theoretical insights and to develop a structured yet flexible framework that captures the components of unconventional OD (Langley and Abdallah, 2011).

In line with qualitative research best practices, the study employed methodological triangulation (Denzin, 1978; Flick, 2018). We integrated three complementary sources of data: semi-structured interviews, ethnographic observations, and archival materials (including internal documents, public communications, and social media). This triangulated approach enhanced the credibility and richness of the analysis by allowing us to access multiple dimensions of organizational life and to interpret how unconventional OD is experienced, enacted, and sustained over time (Yin, 2018).

2.5 Identifying the participants

To maximize the potential for meaningful theoretical insight, we purposedly selected five case study organizations following the logic of theoretical replication (Eisenhardt, 1989). This approach strengthens the interpretive depth and the potential for conceptual transferability by enabling a systematic comparison across cases, while still allowing for the identification of firm-specific features and contextual distinctions. Case selection was guided by a rigorous four-criteria framework to ensure relevance and robustness:

i. **Organizational size and age:** First, SMEs represent a particularly fertile terrain for OD research. Their relatively compact scale facilitates a holistic understanding of intra-organizational dynamics, decision-making processes, and structural configurations (Mintzberg, 1989; Romme, 2019). Second, the sample industries and maturity variation enable the identification of cross-cutting patterns and design logics that transcend specific environmental conditions or lifecycle stages (Langley and Abdallah, 2011; Siggelkow, 2007). A minimum of three years of operational trajectory was required to ensure a sufficient degree of organizational consolidation and to differentiate sustained design choices from early-stage experimentation. All selected cases are, therefore, Spanish small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), with operational trajectories ranging from three to over forty years. The firms were founded between 1980 and 2018 and vary in size, from micro-organizations with fewer than 50 employees to mid-sized firms with approximately 1,000 employees. They also operate across a diverse range of industries, including manufacturing, advertising, human resource services, management consulting, and IT. Geographically, the sample reflects a wide territorial distribution within Spain, with companies located in Madrid, Aragón, Cataluña, and Galicia. This organizational diversity (across sector, size, age, and region) enhances the analytical richness of the study.

ii. **Unconventional OD:** A defining criterion for case inclusion was the demonstrable presence of an unconventional OD. This refers to models that diverge from traditional hierarchical, bureaucratic, or functionally siloed structures, embracing instead features such as distributed authority, participatory governance, self-management, or simplified hierarchical structures and communication systems. In all five cases, these unconventional elements were not only explicitly articulated and self-assigned by members of the organizations but also consistently acknowledged by external

stakeholders, such as academic publications, business media, or practitioner communities.

This dual identification process, combining how organizations describe themselves and how they are perceived in relevant professional and scholarly domains, was central to ensuring that the selected cases exhibited not merely rhetorical alignment with alternative organizing paradigms but embodied such principles in observable and sustained practices (Martela, 2019; Lee and Edmondson, 2017). The case selection process included an extensive pre-screening phase involving corporate websites, interviews with founders and executives, social media presence, published interviews, and documentation from conferences or professional networks.

Additionally, this criterion enabled us to exclude organizations that, although initially considered due to surface-level discourse or aesthetic alignment with new organizing trends, did not exhibit substantive deviation from conventional structures upon closer scrutiny. This exclusion process highlights the importance of rigorous vetting in the study of organizations claiming innovative identities (Foss and Klein, 2022), ensuring that inclusion was based on embodied practices rather than promotional narratives. Ultimately, the firms selected for this study represent trustworthy and compelling instantiations of unconventional OD, as evidenced by both internal narratives and external recognition.

iii. **Innovative organizational challenges:** Consistent with the conceptual framing of this research, selected firms demonstrated an active engagement with core OD challenges such as task division, coordination, governance, and incentive structures (Puranam et al., 2014). This criterion ensured the analytical relevance of the cases, allowing for an empirical examination of how unconventional organizations address foundational problems of organizing in novel ways.

This dimension of the selection process proved particularly useful in distinguishing between stylistic innovations and substantive OD. Several cases that passed earlier screening stages were excluded at this point due to an absence of discernible innovation in their design architecture. This iterative refinement reinforced the quality and coherence of the final sample, ensuring alignment between empirical selection and theoretical aims.

To isolate deliberate OD choices from reactive adaptations to contextual emergency crises, only firms whose unconventional practices predated the COVID-19 pandemic were included. Interview protocols incorporated specific prompts to verify the

intentionality and temporal continuity of the practices observed. This ensured that the data reflected established design logics rather than short-term tactical responses to environmental turbulence.

iv. **Access to in-depth data:** Finally, inclusion requires sustained and multi-modal research access. This extended beyond formal interviews to include informal conversations, document sharing, direct observations, and follow-up interactions. Access encompassed diverse roles within each organization (founders, middle managers, and frontline staff) thereby enabling triangulation across perspectives and a richer understanding of how OD is constructed and lived.

This diversity of voices and modes of access was particularly valuable given the nature of unconventional OD, which often relies on distributed, informal, and tacit mechanisms not easily captured through traditional documentation or top-down accounts (Gioia et al., 2013; Langley and Abdallah, 2011). Such access was indispensable for constructing a context-sensitive and interpretively grounded understanding of the design configurations under study.

To preserve confidentiality and anonymity, the five organizations are referred to throughout the dissertation using pseudonyms: Beta, Gamma, Zeta, Kappa, and Sigma. Table 6 provides a comparative overview of their key features, including sector, geographic location, size, and year of foundation.

Table 6. Overview of sampled firms

	Beta	*Gamma*	*Kappa*	*Sigma*	*Zeta*
Founded	1980	1997	2018	2007	2009
Region	Aragón	Cataluña	Galicia	Madrid	Madrid
# employees	51-200	201-500	10-50	501-1000	51-200
Sector	Manufacturing	Advertising Agencies	Management consulting	IT services	HR management

Source: own elaboration

2.6 Research instrument

Following Yin's (2003) recommendations for qualitative research, we employed multiple data collection methods to ensure a rich and comprehensive dataset, integrating interviews, ethnographic observations, archival data analysis, and social media reviews. This approach allowed for data triangulation, mitigating bias by corroborating findings across multiple sources. Table 7 presents an overview of the data collection methods used.

Table 7. Overview of data collection

	Beta	*Gamma*	*Kappa*	*Sigma*	*Zeta*
1st round of interviews	**7**	**8**	**5**	**4**	**5**
(total 29 interviews, total +28 hours)	7 hours	8 hours	5 hours	3 hours	5 hours
Executive roles	1	2	1	1	2
Senior roles	2	4	2	1	1
Analyst roles	4	2	2	2	2
Follow up interviews	**2**	**4**	**2**	**8**	**3**
(total 19 interviews, total +9 hours)	0,5 hours	2 hours	1 hour	5 hours	3 hours
Executive roles	1	3	1	2	3
Senior roles	1	1		3	
Analyst roles			1	3	
Etnographic observations (total +155 hours)	13 hours	24 hours	13 hours	5 hours	100 hours
Archival sources (total +247 events)					
Company´s documentation	27 pages	152 pages	9 pages	37 pages	270 pages
Social media (company´s or employee´s)	25 post	39 post	19 post	14 post	25 post
3rd parties media					
Articles in newspaper or magazine	9 pages	10 pages	5 pages	5 pages	3 pages
TV/Radio/Podcast	115 minutes	165 minutes	90 minutes	45 minutes	45 minutes

Source: own elaboration

Semi-structured interviews

In qualitative organizational research, interviews constitute a key methodological tool for accessing the lived experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of actors embedded within complex social systems (Langley and Abdallah, 2011). Given the exploratory nature of this study and its focus on understanding the nuanced dynamics of unconventional OD, semi-structured interviews were employed as the primary data collection method. This format provides a structured yet flexible approach, allowing for consistency across interviews while accommodating the emergence of context-specific insights (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009; Flick, 2013).

To enhance the representativeness and internal validity of the data, a maximum-variation sampling strategy was applied (Patton, 2002). This strategy is particularly valuable in organizational studies aiming to uncover the heterogeneity of practices and perceptions across

multiple levels and functions. Participants were selected through a combination of purposive and snowball sampling, ensuring both initial diversity and the identification of additional informants with relevant knowledge. In line with this logic, individuals were chosen to reflect a broad range of roles, responsibilities, and viewpoints within each case organization. This included founders, senior managers, middle managers, and frontline employees across various business units and functional areas. Diversity in demographic background and geographical location was also considered, as some of the organizations had geographically distributed or hybrid teams. In total, 48 interviews were conducted across the five case study firms.

Data collection took place over an extended period of six months for each organization, enabling a deeper engagement with their evolving practices and internal rhythms. Interviews were conducted either in person at the company premises or via secure remote platforms, depending on feasibility and participant availability. Additionally, 19 follow-up conversations were carried out, either on-site or remotely via telephone or video conferencing, to clarify emergent themes, validate preliminary interpretations, or deepen the understanding of specific design elements. All interviews were conducted by the researcher, ensuring continuity and contextual sensitivity throughout the process.

Design and implementation of the interview protocol

The interview protocol was carefully developed to elicit rich descriptions of each organization's design features, operational logics, and internal dynamics. Its structure was grounded in established OD literature and informed by the key dimensions of organizational structure, coordination mechanisms, and culture (Mintzberg, 1979; Galbraith, 1974; Burton et al., 2006). Particular attention was paid to unconventional design elements such as distributed authority, self-management, peer coordination, and emergent norms, as suggested by recent scholarship (Lee and Edmondson, 2017; Martela, 2019; Puranam et al., 2014).

The protocol adopted a layered approach, guiding the conversation through a combination of open-ended and probing questions. It explored the evolution of each organization's design trajectory, participants' understanding of key turning points or transitions, and their individual and collective experiences of working within non-traditional governance structures. The interviews were designed to capture phenomena at strategic, tactical, and operational levels, while also enabling respondents to reflect on informal routines, tensions, and perceived trade-offs in their organizational life.

Although the core structure of the guide remained consistent across firms to ensure comparability, it was tailored to the role, tenure, and position of each informant. This adaptive design allowed the interviewer to engage meaningfully with both high-level strategic reflections and granular, context-specific narratives. A complete version of the interview guide is included in Appendix A.

The protocol also incorporated opportunities for participant-led exploration. Interviewees were encouraged to reflect on specific moments, practices, or changes they deemed particularly illustrative. They were also presented with examples of concepts and practices from the broader literature on unconventional organizing, such as self-management, holacracy, or participatory decision-making, to stimulate critical reflection and enrich the dialogue. To facilitate this, the researcher sometimes introduced supporting materials (e.g., published articles or company media posts) during the conversation.

Interview duration ranged from 40 minutes to over two hours, with most sessions averaging around 50 minutes. Where feasible and with consent, interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim. In the few cases where recording was not possible, detailed notes were taken in real time and complemented by analytic memos written immediately afterward to capture contextual and non-verbal cues.

Interviewing continued until thematic saturation was reached; this is until additional interviews no longer yielded substantially new information or insights relevant to the research questions (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Guest et al., 2006). This flexible, iterative approach to data collection was essential for uncovering the situated dynamics of unconventional OD and for constructing a robust, grounded understanding of the emerging components across diverse organizational contexts.

Finally, where clarification was required or new insights emerged from data analysis, informal follow-up interactions were initiated via secure communication channels such as encrypted email, WhatsApp, or brief video calls. This sustained engagement ensured both the validity of interpretation and the depth of empirical insight necessary for a rigorous and context-sensitive study of OD.

Ethnographic observations

To complement the interviews and enable a deeper contextual understanding of the organizational phenomena under study, the research design incorporated direct organizational observations as a core data source. Observational data are particularly valuable in organizational research, as they offer a direct window into behavioral patterns, interactional routines, and non-verbal expressions of organizational culture that may not be explicitly articulated by informants (Yin, 2017; Czarniawska, 2007).

In this study, two complementary modes of observation were systematically employed across all five case study organizations. The first mode consisted of active, immersive observation during scheduled organizational events, such as team meetings, planning sessions, and strategic retreats. In these settings, the researcher participated as an explicitly acknowledged observer, occasionally engaging in facilitated activities while maintaining a reflective stance. This immersive involvement enabled a nuanced appreciation of how organizational principles were enacted in real-time, providing critical insights into coordination practices, informal leadership dynamics, and manifestations of organizational values (Spradley, 1980; Nicolini, 2009).

The second mode involved a more passive, ambient form of observation, wherein the researcher spent time onsite without a formal agenda, often before or after scheduled interviews. These sessions typically consisted of working from the organization's premises for several hours, allowing for informal exposure to everyday routines and spontaneous interactions. Although less structured, this approach proved especially useful for discerning subtle behavioural patterns and validating interview data through first-hand observation of workplace practices, spatial arrangements, and communication flows (Van Maanen, 2011; Feldman and Orlikowski, 2011). For instance, the researcher noted who interacted with whom, how requests were formulated, whether employees gravitated toward fixed spaces, or how punctuality and time use were collectively negotiated. These passive observations allowed for the detection of latent organizational scripts and everyday enactments of hierarchy, autonomy, or peer influence, which are often difficult to elicit through interviews alone (Goffman, 1959).

By triangulating these two forms of observation, structured participation and unobtrusive presence, the research design enhanced the empirical robustness of the findings. The combination allowed for the validation of informants' narratives, the identification of discrepancies between espoused and enacted practices, and the development of thick

descriptions that situated OD features in their lived context (Geertz, 1973). Observational notes were systematically recorded following each visit, and recurring patterns were thematically coded in parallel with the interview data to support the iterative theorizing process.

Archival data

To complement the primary data obtained through interviews and observations, this study made extensive use of archival material. Archival data are widely recognized in qualitative research to contextualize fieldwork, triangulate findings, and enhance the validity of case-based interpretations (Ventresca and Mohr, 2002; Yin, 2017). In line with this tradition, the collection and analysis of documentary evidence played a crucial role in providing both background information and empirical insights into the OD practices of the selected firms.

The archival corpus included multiple categories of documentation, both internal and external, public and confidential. First, organizational documents produced by the firms themselves were reviewed. These encompassed internal materials such as job profiles, organizational charts, value statements, codes of conduct, operating manuals, and internal communications (e.g., emails, newsletters, and memos). While not always systematically analyzed as primary empirical material, these documents served as important sources for contextual understanding, preparation of interviews, and verification of informants' claims, especially when investigating issues such as governance forms, authority relationships, or role formalization.

Second, publications authored by organizational leaders, including books, articles, and opinion pieces, were examined when available. These materials, though written in a personal capacity, were often closely tied to the experience of the firms and provided insight into the espoused philosophies and normative ideals underlying their OD practices. Such texts were especially valuable for understanding the cognitive frames and conceptual vocabularies that leaders used to describe and legitimize their unconventional approaches (Kaplan, 2008; Cornelissen, 2012).

Third, extensive data were gathered from social media platforms, including LinkedIn, Twitter, Instagram, Glassdoor, and TikTok. Content posted by the companies themselves, as well as by individual employees in public forums, offered a rich source of discourse on organizational life, work practices, and cultural values. Social media posts were used not only to understand how the firms portrayed themselves externally but also to assess consistency with internal narratives and uncover possible dissonances. Comments and reviews from third parties (e.g.,

former employees, clients, or external observers) were included selectively, primarily to cross-check reputational claims and gauge public perception.

Fourth, third-party media sources were incorporated into the documental analysis. These comprised journalistic coverage in both print and digital formats, including interviews with organizational members, features in business magazines, and news articles referencing the companies. In addition to traditional press, the study also drew upon appearances in broadcast and digital media, such as television or radio interviews, podcasts, and YouTube content, when relevant. These materials were particularly useful for tracing how the companies were perceived externally and for validating their self-identification as unconventional organizations. The fact that several firms had been featured in national or regional media as examples of alternative organizational models further reinforced their eligibility for this research.

All archival sources were systematically catalogued and linked to the relevant dimensions of the OD framework guiding the study. Most of the documents analyzed were publicly accessible, though in certain cases, confidential materials were shared by participants under the ethical safeguards approved by the CETIS Commission of Universidad Pontificia Comillas. In these cases, data were handled with strict confidentiality and used solely for academic purposes.

Taken together, the use of archival data provided a critical layer of triangulation, enabled temporal and discursive analysis, and enriched the interpretive depth of the case narratives. By integrating diverse types of documents and media, the research gained a multi-perspectival understanding of the design choices, narratives, and institutional framing that characterize unconventional OD in practice.

2.7 Ethical considerations

This study adheres to the ethical standards established by the Research Governance and Ethics Committee of Universidad Pontificia Comillas. Prior to commencing data collection, an Ethical Approval Application was submitted and formally approved by the Competitividad Empresarial y Territorial, Innovación y Sostenibilidad (CETIS) Comillas-ICADE Doctoral Program's Commission, confirming compliance with institutional and European guidelines for

the ethical conduct of social science research, including the protection of personal data, informed consent procedures, and participant anonymity.

Consistent with the university's protocols, ethical approval was obtained before any empirical work began, as mandated by the requirement that all doctoral students secure a clean ethical report prior to data collection. The research design was evaluated to ensure that it did not involve vulnerable populations, sensitive personal data, or high-risk procedures. Consequently, the study was classified as low risk and approved under standard CETIS review procedures.

Participants were selected through a combination of purposive and snowball sampling. All individuals were fully informed about the aims of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any point without consequence. Informed consent was explicitly obtained in writing prior to conducting any interviews or observations. The consent forms outlined participants' rights under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), including access, rectification, and the right to erasure.

Personal data was handled in full compliance with the highest standards of confidentiality and data protection. Identifiable information was stored separately from research data, and all materials, including interview recordings, transcripts, and analytical notes, were securely stored in a university-authorized cloud environment with multi-factor authentication protocols. Access to this encrypted storage system was strictly limited to the researcher and required a combination of institutional credentials and real-time authentication via a mobile device. Participants were assigned pseudonyms, and no identifiable information was included in the data analysis or in any dissemination of research findings.

Data were collected through audio recordings in in-person interviews and through video and audio recordings for remote interviews conducted via Microsoft Teams or equivalent platforms. All interviews were subsequently transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were anonymized, with all references to names, specific locations, or identifiable features systematically removed.

Throughout the research process, all necessary steps were taken to ensure that participants were treated with dignity, respect, and transparency. The study was classified as posing minimal ethical risk and was carefully designed to prevent any form of stigmatization or harm. In accordance with the approved Ethical Application, the researcher adhered strictly to the

protocol endorsed by the CETIS Commission and confirmed that no substantive modifications were made to the research design after approval.

2.8 Initial contact and access negotiation

Following the identification of organizations that fulfilled the predefined inclusion criteria for this study, we initiated an access negotiation process through direct, unsolicited outreach. This stage combined purposive sampling logic (Patton, 2002) with a cold-contact approach, primarily through LinkedIn or email communication. In each case, the initial message briefly introduced the researcher, outlined the academic purpose of the project, and expressed interest in the firm's potential relevance to a broader inquiry into unconventional organizational designs. Of the eight organizations contacted, two did not respond to repeated follow-up attempts, while another engaged in preliminary communication but subsequently withdrew, leading to its exclusion. The five remaining firms confirmed their willingness to participate and remained involved throughout the study.

Upon receiving a positive reply, we scheduled an introductory phone call to establish a foundation of mutual understanding and trust. During these conversations, we formally presented the research objectives, clarified the academic and non-commercial nature of the study, and assured confidentiality and anonymity in both data handling and publication. We also provided a realistic estimate of the time commitment required from their side and discussed the intended research activities, which included in-depth interviews, on-site ethnographic observation, and the review of internal documentation when available.

These early conversations revealed a variety of initial concerns from prospective participants, including questions regarding the scope of observation, data sensitivity, and the extent to which their organizational practices would be interpreted or evaluated. To address these, we emphasized our non-evaluative, exploratory stance and the academic value of their participation. This dialogic and transparent approach contributed to establishing researcher legitimacy and building the relational trust necessary to conduct qualitative fieldwork within organizational settings (Yin, 2018). Gaining access to field sites under these conditions, absent prior affiliation and based solely on the perceived value of the research, mirrors the complexities often faced in organizational ethnography, where trust, clarity of purpose, and methodological integrity must be actively cultivated from the outset.

2.9 Reflections on the fieldwork process

Conducting fieldwork in five organizations with unconventional OD was not merely a technical exercise of data collection, but a prolonged process of interpretive engagement, relationship-building, and reflexive adaptation. This section offers a reflective account of the fieldwork phase, emphasizing the researcher's positioning, strategies of access, intensity of engagement, learning through immersion, and interpretive limitations encountered throughout the process

Researcher positioning and access negotiation

At the outset of this study, the researcher had no prior personal or professional ties to any of the selected organizations or their members. While some familiarity with unconventional organizational forms existed, mainly through international examples or early-stage start-ups, none of these cases met the inclusion criteria in terms of geographic scope or organizational maturity. Consequently, access to the five case study firms was negotiated through unsolicited, cold outreach.

This outsider positioning proved to be both a challenge and an asset. On the one hand, negotiating access without relational bridges required building legitimacy from scratch, often through carefully crafted initial messages that resonated with the values and interests of the recipient. These messages aimed to signal academic rigor, non-commercial intent, and a genuine curiosity about their organizational model. On the other hand, this distance allowed for a neutral stance, unencumbered by prior expectations, and helped cultivate trust through a transparent, dialogic approach to participation.

The access negotiation process involved iterative screening. As expected, several organizations initially identified were excluded after failing to meet one or more of the selection criteria. In one case, a firm that had initially agreed to participate later ceased communication, underscoring the futility and challenges associated with gaining realistic and solid access to qualitative research. Ultimately, the five organizations that agreed to participate did so willingly and remained engaged throughout the research. Their cultural predisposition towards openness, experimentation, and shared purpose likely facilitated the acceptance of an external researcher into their organizational routines.

Engagement intensity and field adaptation

The fieldwork strategy prioritized deep immersion and sustained interaction. Data collection in each organization spanned approximately six months, distributed across multiple visits and contact moments. Rather than adhering to a rigid sequence, the researcher adopted a flexible, opportunistic approach to maximize the richness of each interaction. For example, when interviews were scheduled in person, the researcher often requested to arrive a few hours earlier to work from the company premises. This allowed for unobtrusive observation of daily routines and informal dynamics, enriching the contextual understanding of the organization.

Preparation for each interaction was meticulous. Prior to each company visit, the researcher reviewed publicly available information, including organizational websites, social media content, and published materials, and tailored interview guides accordingly. All interviews were conducted by the same researcher, ensuring consistency in tone and interpretive approach. During each interview, handwritten notes were taken alongside audio recordings to highlight salient quotes, emotional cues, or contextual observations. Immediately following each session, these notes were systematically organized, and analytic memos were written to capture emergent themes and possible points of triangulation.

This practice of "hot capture", documenting insights while they were still fresh, was informed by prior professional experience as an organizational consultant, where conducting interviews and structuring feedback in real time was a core activity. It also resonates with recommendations from fieldwork literature emphasizing the importance of temporal proximity in analytic note-taking to preserve detail, nuance, and researcher reflexivity (Emerson et al., 2011).

Such systematic engagement enhanced not only the depth of understanding but also the capacity to detect dissonances between organizational discourse and lived practice, an especially pertinent issue in settings where aspirational narratives and operational realities may diverge.

Learning from immersion: beyond interviews

One of the most valuable insights uncovered during the fieldwork phase emerged from the layered combination of formal interviews and informal, ethnographic immersion. While interviews provided access to participants' interpretations, intentions, and experiences, the

observational component revealed behavioral patterns and tacit routines that often elude verbal articulation. The interplay between these two modalities proved central to the interpretive process.

Crucially, many revealing moments occurred not during formal meetings but in mundane, everyday contexts, over lunch, in open workspaces, or during commutes. For instance, during one field visit to a manufacturing site in Huesca, transportation constraints led the researcher to travel to the office with an employee in the morning and return later with a supplier. These conversations, conducted in the liminal spaces between formal events, proved unexpectedly rich, offering grounded illustrations of how OD was experienced and interpreted by different actors.

Passive observation of office environments also yielded important insights. Seemingly minor details observed, such as who sat where, who initiated conversations, how requests were formulated, whether punctuality was socially enforced, provided important clues about informal power structures, norms of collaboration, and behavioral routines. These moments helped validate or question the claims made in interviews, contributing to a richer, more grounded account of the organizational settings under study.

Such immersion into the micro-textures of organizational life enabled the detection of latent scripts and subtle enactments of design principles. These included spontaneous acts of peer support, the informal management of tensions, or the symbolic use of space and artefacts, all of which offered a thick description of the lived experience of unconventional OD.

Reflexivity and interpretive limits

As in all qualitative research, the researcher's interpretive lens shaped the way phenomena were observed, documented, and analyzed. Prior professional experience in OD and consulting facilitated certain aspects of fieldwork, particularly in conducting interviews, identifying relevant issues, and systematically structuring feedback. However, it also brought with it a set of assumptions, sensitivities, and potential blind spots.

Throughout the research process, efforts were made to remain critically reflexive and to minimize the influence of prior beliefs. This included consciously suspending early interpretations, contrasting different sources of data, and actively seeking disconfirming

evidence. Still, the inherent subjectivity of qualitative inquiry requires an acknowledgment of these interpretive limitations.

Another constraint emerged from the uneven codifiability of different data sources. While interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed through a rigorous coding process, not all observations or archival materials were systematized to the same degree. For practical reasons, informal conversations and passive observations were documented through fieldnotes and reflective memos but not subjected to line-by-line coding. Similarly, archival materials were reviewed in depth and used to triangulate claims, but not formally codified. Ethical considerations also shaped the fieldwork process. For instance, when interviews concluded and participants engaged in informal conversations "off the record", the researcher systematically ceased audio recording. Confidentiality was always respected throughout the research process, and sensitive information was handled with discretion and integrity.

Ultimately, the fieldwork process constituted more than a methodical means of data collection. It became a profound learning experience about how OD is lived, performed, and negotiated in practice. The combination of prolonged engagement, adaptive strategies, and reflexive awareness enabled the researcher to generate a nuanced, multi-layered understanding of the studied organizations, and to derive analytical insights that are both contextually grounded and theoretically resonant.

2.10 Data credibility, reliability and contextual considerations

Ensuring the credibility and interpretive validity of qualitative data is of paramount importance in inductive research, particularly when dealing with rich, subjective, and context-dependent insights about OD practices. This study adopted multiple strategies to enhance data reliability, while also acknowledging the interpretive and abductive nature of the analysis and the limitations inherent in qualitative inquiry.

Informant credibility and role diversity

A key decision to enhance the credibility of the data was the inclusion of a broad and heterogeneous range of participants within each case study organization. A minimum of four and a maximum of eight informants were interviewed per company, encompassing founders, senior executives, middle managers, and frontline employees. This internal variety allowed for

the triangulation of perspectives within each firm and enriched the understanding of organizational dynamics from multiple vantage points, strategic, operational, and cultural.

Importantly, the selected informants also varied significantly in age, professional tenure, and length of time within the organization. This diversity added interpretive depth to the analysis, as participants drew from different reference points, organizational knowledge, and personal trajectories. Senior employees with long tenures often offered retrospective accounts of how OD choices had evolved over time, while newcomers, regardless of age, provided fresh perspectives and highlighted discontinuities or frictions that might otherwise have been normalized by long-standing insiders. Similarly, junior professionals or employees in early career stages tended to describe organizational practices in experiential and relational terms, often lacking broader comparative frames of reference, yet illuminating how design principles are embodied in day-to-day work and interpersonal dynamics.

Rather than treating these differences as analytical noise, the study leveraged them as valuable sources of contrast. They enabled a richer and more plural understanding of how unconventional design elements are interpreted, appropriated, or contested by individuals with distinct life experiences and organizational journeys. Recognizing the potential for interpretive biases, linked to role, age, tenure, or professional background, the analysis remained attentive to patterns of convergence and divergence across sources.

This approach aligns with recent calls in organizational research to account for how age, seniority, and tenure shape the enactment and interpretation of organizational structures, particularly in designs that challenge traditional role boundaries or managerial hierarchies (Barley, 1989; Wrzesniewski t al., 2003; Puranam et al., 2014).

Methodological delimitations and selective codification

While the overall research design incorporated multiple sources of qualitative evidence, including interviews, ethnographic observations, archival documentation, and social media analysis, only the interview transcripts were subjected to formal and systematic coding. This decision was guided by both analytical focus and pragmatic considerations. Given the centrality of participants' lived experiences in this study, and the need for interpretive depth, the interview data were coded line-by-line using an iterative process informed by Gioia et al. (2013) and Strauss and Corbin (1998), including both open and axial coding stages.

By contrast, data from organizational observations, internal documents, external publications, and social media content were not codified systematically. Instead, these materials were compiled into structured analytical dossiers that supported the interpretive process through triangulation. They were mobilized to contextualize interview narratives, verify claims, and identify potential discrepancies between espoused and enacted practices. For instance, observational field notes were frequently used to cross-check narratives around autonomy, coordination, or peer dynamics, while organizational artefacts (e.g., value statements, role descriptions) helped validate or problematize participant interpretations.

This selective codification strategy reflects a conscious methodological choice to prioritize depth over breadth in the formal coding process while retaining the richness and complementarity of diverse data sources.

Context of enquiry and interpretive anchoring

The fieldwork took place in five Spanish organizations located in diverse regions (Madrid, Aragón, Catalonia, and Galicia) and spanning various industries (manufacturing, IT services, HR consultancy, media agency, and management consulting). These companies operated under different institutional logics, market conditions, and organizational maturities, allowing for a cross-contextual examination of unconventional OD practices.

Interpretation of the data was deeply anchored in the spatial, temporal, and relational contexts in which the material was collected. Prolonged engagement with each organization, approximately six months per case, enabled the researcher to capture both recurrent patterns and emergent developments. The use of immersive observation and follow-up conversations over time contributed to identifying inconsistencies between participants' accounts and observed behaviors or documented practices.

Attention was also paid to the subtle cues embedded in informal settings, such as hallway interactions, shared meals, and transportation arrangements with employees, which provided valuable insights into the implicit norms, social hierarchies, and affective textures of organizational life. These moments, while methodologically less formal, were documented through systematic memoing and often served as interpretive anchors for understanding deeper cultural and coordination logics.

Such attention to context and process aligns with recent methodological recommendations in qualitative organization design research (Langley and Tsoukas, 2017; Gehman et al., 2018), reinforcing the interpretive trustworthiness of the findings and enabling a nuanced reading of how OD is lived, negotiated, and made meaningful across multiple organizational spaces.

2.11 Technical adequacy

In addition to ensuring methodological fit, qualitative research must also demonstrate technical adequacy, understood as the researcher's capacity to apply methodological tools in a consistent, transparent, and analytically sound manner (Edmondson and McManus, 2007). In this study, technical adequacy was pursued through three interrelated dimensions: rigorous instrument design, systematic data handling, and iterative analytical procedures.

Instrument design and procedural rigor

The design of the semi-structured interview protocol was informed by both established theoretical constructs in the field of OD and exploratory reflections drawn from early contacts with the empirical setting. The protocol was carefully reviewed and iteratively refined prior to fieldwork to ensure its clarity, adaptability across organizational contexts, and capacity to elicit both descriptive and interpretive insights. The flexibility of the interview structure allowed participants to articulate their own definitions and experiences, thus mitigating the risk of theoretical priming.

All interviews were conducted by the same researcher, ensuring procedural consistency and minimizing variability in how questions were posed or interpreted. A standard process was followed across cases regarding participant briefing, informed consent, and interview closure, including the systematic documentation of contextual elements immediately after each session.

Systematic data handling and analytical traceability

All interviews were audio-recorded, with explicit consent, and transcribed verbatim. During and immediately after each interview, the researcher took systematic notes to register key insights, contextual cues, and preliminary analytical leads. These notes were classified and integrated into individual case dossiers, which also included relevant archival materials, observational fieldnotes, and social media content gathered before, during, or after the main fieldwork.

Although only the interview transcripts were subject to detailed open and axial coding, the additional materials were carefully archived and used to contextualize and triangulate findings. This approach enabled a robust interpretive process while maintaining a manageable scope of codification. The coding was conducted manually, without the use of qualitative analysis software, and iteratively refined through repeated engagement with the data, drawing on the principles of the Gioia methodology (Gioia, Corley and Hamilton, 2013).

Iterative refinement and validation strategies

Throughout the empirical process, analytical decisions were continually tested and revisited through within-case and cross-case comparisons. When interpretive ambiguities or conflicting accounts emerged, these were addressed through further reflection, examination of observational materials, or, in some instances, follow-up conversations with informants.

In addition, ongoing peer feedback played a central role in ensuring the technical adequacy of the study. Preliminary findings and methodological choices were regularly presented in doctoral research seminars and academic workshops, where they were subjected to critical scrutiny. Participation in these settings allowed the researcher to refine conceptual clarity, strengthen analytical coherence, and ensure alignment with academic standards in the field of organization studies.

Taken together, these strategies demonstrate a sustained commitment to methodological discipline and empirical rigor, ensuring the robustness and credibility of the research process.

2.12 Data analysis

The analysis process followed a logic of inductive theory building, grounded in the iterative examination of qualitative data and progressively refined through a combination of within-case and cross-case comparisons (Eisenhardt, 1989; Gioia et al., 2013). Our objective was to derive empirically grounded theoretical insights into the components of unconventional OD, rather than test predefined hypotheses or impose pre-existing categories onto the data.

To ensure analytical robustness, we implemented a series of methodological safeguards recommended in qualitative research literature (Creswell and Poth, 2016; Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Maxwell, 2012). These included: (1) long-term engagement in the field to enhance contextual sensitivity and detect spurious associations; (2) participant validation of emerging

findings during and after the interview process; (3) triangulation across data sources and collection methods; and (4) a rigorous, traceable documentation of data management and analytical decisions.

Data analysis began concurrently with data collection, following an abductive logic in which empirical material and theoretical constructs were developed in parallel through constant iteration (Dubois and Gadde, 2002). A rigorous open coding process was applied to the interview transcripts, which constituted the primary dataset for identifying the foundational features of unconventional OD. Drawing from the Gioia methodology (Gioia et al., 2013), we employed a three-step analytical sequence:

i. **First-order coding**: Informant-centric codes were extracted using in-vivo expressions or concise descriptors to capture salient ideas, routines, and organizational practices as experienced and narrated by participants (Corbin and Strauss, 2014; Van Maanen, 1979).
ii. **Second-order coding**: Through axial coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1990), the first-order codes were grouped into broader conceptual categories that reflected emerging theoretical patterns and design principles.
iii. **Aggregate dimensions**: These second-order themes were then integrated into a smaller number of aggregate components, which constitute the conceptual framework of unconventional OD proposed in this dissertation.

Cross-case analysis played a central role in this phase. While each case was first treated as an internally coherent system, allowing us to develop case-specific narratives and confirm their qualification as unconventional, we then conducted systematic comparisons across cases to identify recurring design elements and understand their contextual variability. Themes were retained only if they emerged across multiple firms and were validated through multiple data sources.

Although the core of our coding work focused on interview data, additional sources such as ethnographic fieldnotes and archival documents were used extensively to triangulate and contextualize our findings. These complementary data sources were not subjected to systematic coding but were analyzed interpretively, serving three primary functions: (1) to inform the preparation of interviews and refine emergent hypotheses; (2) to validate or problematize participant claims; and (3) to enrich the narrative understanding of organizational dynamics

through illustrative examples, discursive patterns, and symbolic artefacts (Ventresca and Mohr, 2002; Feldman and Orlikowski, 2011).

This layered strategy allowed us to balance analytical depth with contextual richness, acknowledging that the meaning and manifestation of design choices are often embedded in micro-interactions, language, and institutional histories that exceed what can be captured through structured interviews alone.

To enhance credibility, we adhered to a case study protocol across all five firms, maintained a detailed chain of evidence (Yin, 2018), and shared emerging findings with participants for feedback. We also kept comprehensive analytic memos, developed during the coding and cross-case analysis, to track interpretive decisions and reflect on our positionality as researchers.

The resulting data structure is composed of six interrelated components: responsible freedom, ample transparency, collaborative and boundaryless workflows, adaptive governance, disruptive and continuous innovation, and sustainable impact, which collectively characterize the OD logics identified in our study. While analytically distinct, these dimensions are conceptually interwoven, reflecting the hybrid, evolving, and context-sensitive nature of unconventional OD. Table 8 summarizes the final data structure, linking codes, themes, and aggregate dimensions.

Table 8. Overview of final data structure

	First order categories	*Second order themes*	*Aggregate components*
(1)	Autonomous decision-making	Trusted autonomy	Responsible freedom
(2)	Encouraging job autonomy		
(3)	Trust		
(1)	Self-management	Self-management and accountability	
(2)	Self-directed work allocation		
(3)	Self-managed and flexible organisation		

	First order categories	*Second order themes*	*Aggregate components*
(4)	Accountability for outcomes		
(5)	Responsible freedom for time management		
(1)	Transparency as a norm	Normalized transparency	Ample transparency
(2)	Building transparency and trust		
(1)	Shared intelligence through self-reporting	Unrestricted access to information	
(2)	Information democratization		
(3)	Information as a shared common good		
(4)	Democratization of sensitive financial business intelligence		
(1)	Collaborative teamwork dynamics	Collaborative decision making	Collaborative and boundaryless workflows
(2)	Collaborative work		
(1)	Collective intelligence as a driver for better work/HR practice	Collective intelligence	
(2)	Collective effort to contribute to business intelligence		
(3)	Community of (autonomous) experts		
(4)	Communities of practices for knowledge sharing		
(1)	Bureaucracy-free organisation	Agile and flat structure	Adaptive governance
(2)	Eliminating hierarchical barriers for collective success		
(3)	Flat hierarchy		
(4)	Flat organisation		

	First order categories	*Second order themes*	*Aggregate components*
(5)	Flattening hierarchies by eliminating direct supervisors to foment responsible freedom and creativity		
(6)	Flattening hierarchies by eliminating job titles and status symbols		
(1)	Decentralization of decision-making	Decentralized decision making	
(2)	Distributed authority		
(1)	Empowering knowledge-driven decision-making	Expertise-driven decision-making	
(2)	Expert-driven facilitation		
(3)	Expertise-based leadership		
(1)	Collaborative governance	Participative governance	
(2)	Consensus-driven hiring decisions		
(3)	Peer accountability		
(4)	Role clarity		
(1)	Cultural belonging	Ritual driven culture reinforcement	
(2)	Institutionalizing rituals to reinforce cultural values		
(3)	Strengthening organizational culture through personal connections		
(1)	Relentless progress	Continuous improvement mindset	Disruptive and continuous innovation
(2)	Failure as an opportunity for continuous improvement		
(3)	Learning from failures for continuous improvement		
(1)	Disruptive and innovative work practices	Disruptive innovation	

	First order categories	*Second order themes*	*Aggregate components*
(2)	Encouraging proactive experimentation		
(3)	Experimental approaches to work practices		
(4)	Experimental workspace dynamic assignment to encouraged self-management and collaboration		
(1)	Concern for employees' wellbeing and development	Psychological safety	Sustainable impact
(2)	Effort to improve employees' lives and wellbeing		
(3)	Fostering psychological safety		
(1)	Flexible work practices	Employee flexibility	
(2)	Dynamic workspace arrangement		
(1)	Believing that social impact will drive better economic results	Social impact	
(2)	Business case for social impact		
(3)	Caring for making a positive impact on society		
(4)	Committed to being an agent of positive change for clients and the wider community		
(5)	Seeking to make a positive impact on society		

Source: own elaboration

2.13 Conclusions

By adopting an exploratory multiple case study approach, this research systematically examines unconventional OD in SMEs, providing empirical insights that contribute to the broader field of OD. The combination of diverse data sources, rigorous coding processes, and theoretical triangulation ensures the robustness of findings, offering a structured yet flexible framework for understanding emerging OD models in contemporary organizational settings.

Chapter 3. Findings

3.1 Introduction

The analysis reveals that the five case study organizations consistently displayed patterns aligned with what can be characterized as an unconventional organizational design. This shared orientation was not only observable in their internal arrangements but also explicitly recognized by participants as a defining trait of their companies. Across all cases, numerous respondents underscored this distinctiveness, often contrasting it with traditional organizational settings. As one participant noted, *"what happens here, in a traditional company, couldn't happen overnight"* (Beta, Analyst 4).

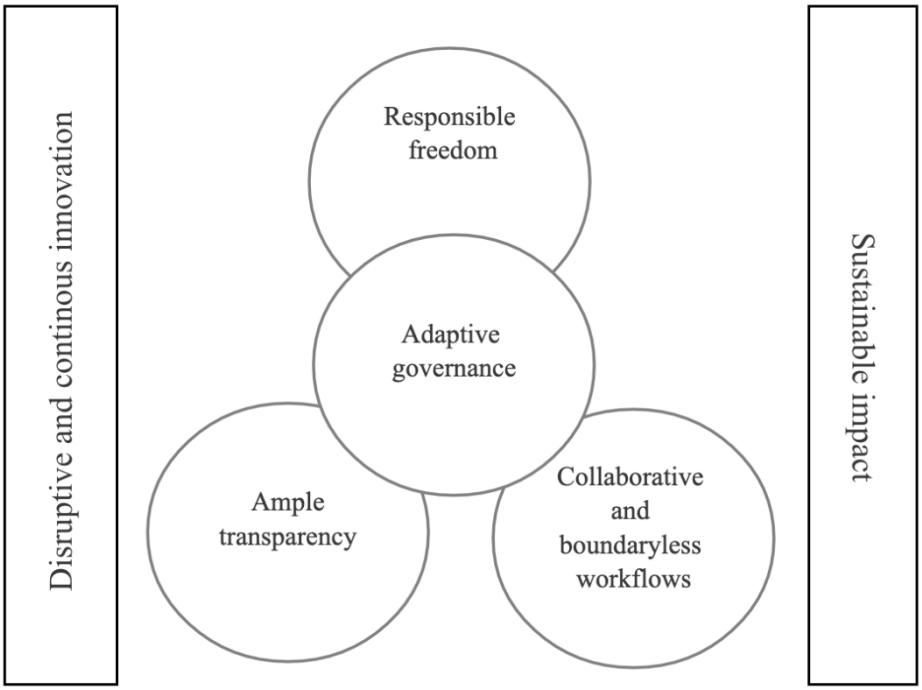
3.2 Systemic interplay of components in unconventional OD

The key components of unconventional OD identified in our data analysis are responsible freedom, ample transparency, collaborative and boundaryless workflows, adaptive governance, disruptive and continuous innovation, and sustainable impact. While analytically distinguishable, these elements exhibit strong interconnections, collectively influencing how these organizations structure activity, coordinate work, and respond to change.

As depicted in Figure 3, disruptive and continuous innovation and sustainable impact function as overarching meta-components. Rather than operating independently, they provide a foundational layer, both structurally and culturally, that supports the configuration and enactment of the other four components. Responsible freedom, ample transparency, and collaborative and boundaryless workflows are closely intertwined, mutually reinforcing norms of autonomy, openness, and fluid collaboration. In turn, adaptive governance acts as an integrative mechanism, facilitating alignment across components and reducing the risk of role ambiguity or coordination breakdowns.

The subsections that follow unpack each of the six components and their associated second-order categories, offering conceptual definitions and analytical grounding. For each dimension, the underlying "rules of thumb" articulated by participants are presented, accompanied by verbatim excerpts that exemplify how these patterns are experienced and enacted in practice. A more extensive compilation of empirical illustrations is provided in Table 9.

Figure 3: Systemic interplay of components in unconventional OD



Source: own elaboration

3.3 Responsible freedom

Responsible freedom reflects how organizations with unconventional designs embed autonomy within a framework of mutual trust and clear expectations, enabling individuals to make decisions, act with initiative, and assume responsibility without the need for continuous hierarchical supervision. Rather than treating autonomy as an unbounded or individualistic trait, the organizations studied here institutionalize it as a central operational logic, ensuring that employee discretion remains aligned with collective priorities. Although this model fostered high levels of engagement and self-direction, it also required ongoing efforts to balance autonomy with coordination and equitable workload distribution. In cases where boundaries or expectations were not sufficiently articulated, autonomy occasionally produced ambiguity, uneven participation, or excessive self-management demands. Two key dimensions emerged in the analysis: trusted autonomy and self-management and accountability.

(i) **Trusted autonomy** describes the interaction between a trust-based organizational climate and the autonomy afforded to employees, who are encouraged to exercise judgment, act independently, and take ownership of their work within a context of mutual accountability. This dimension reflects a departure from hierarchical control, advancing a culture where

autonomy is not only allowed but expected, shaping both individual practices and collective routines.

This ethos is reflected in the way individuals navigate their responsibilities with minimal oversight, while still upholding a strong sense of obligation to their teams and organizational goals. One executive captured this idea by stating, “we realized here you don't have to use the whip. The idea of really motivating people and making people responsible works better” (Gamma, Executive 1). Similarly, another participant observed: “I am autonomous and proactive in delivering solutions, assessing risks, and assuming the outcome” (Kappa, Senior 2). The absence of micromanagement was repeatedly cited as a defining cultural feature: “Micromanagement is not part of the company's DNA” (Gamma, Senior 2).

Observational data supported these accounts. During a field visit to Gamma, the researcher was granted unrestricted access to the premises, despite not being accompanied by an internal sponsor. Upon arrival at the shared office building, she was allowed entry and moved freely throughout the facilities. Interactions occurred naturally, and conversations with employees, including those in senior positions, unfolded without resistance or surprise. This scenario illustrates the deeply embedded trust that permeates the organizational environment, where transparency, openness, and professional discretion are the norm.

This trust translates into broad autonomy over decision-making, scheduling, and specialization. One respondent contrasted this approach with more traditional systems: “The main difference here is the responsibility for managing your own time. A friend told me that in his company, his team relies on him to guide them at every step. Here, it is the opposite. You move forward, you are free to think, create, and make decisions, and then we review and see if your approach fits the project” (Gamma, Senior 1).

The organizational structure supports this autonomy by reducing supervisory layers and encouraging employees to take initiative. As one executive put it, “Here, there are no bosses in the sense of someone constantly telling you what to do at every moment” (Beta, Executive 1). Autonomy also extends to self-directed career development, with individuals empowered to pursue specialization in emerging fields: “I have the ability to choose my tasks and specialize in emerging technologies” (Sigma, Analyst 2).

However, such high levels of discretion also generate coordination challenges, especially in fast-paced or scaling contexts. Without mechanisms to align individual action with collective purpose, fragmentation, inefficiencies, or uneven workloads may arise.

Taken together, these findings suggest that trusted autonomy operates as a reinforcing loop: trust enables autonomy, and autonomy, when exercised responsibly, reinforces trust and shared accountability. This dynamic helps maintain alignment and cohesion despite limited formal oversight.

(ii) **Self-management and accountability** refer to an organizational logic in which individuals autonomously manage their tasks, make operational decisions, and take responsibility for results. This approach moves away from traditional managerial oversight and instead fosters a balanced autonomy aligned with organizational priorities. One executive noted: "the goal is to increase the level of self-management to be more efficient, create a better work environment, improve customer satisfaction, and ultimately enhance financial performance" (Beta, Executive 1).

This model does not imply the absence of structure but involves a shift in authority toward those closest to the work. As one participant noted, "empowering the person who is involved in daily work makes sense; it improves management, but self-management is not a utopian management philosophy" (Gamma, Executive 1). Employees are trusted to plan and deliver their work independently: "I decide how and when to work on my assigned consulting projects" (Kappa, Analyst 2).

Self-management also fosters internal mobility and collaboration, enabling individuals to contribute according to their expertise and interests. A senior respondent described this process as: "since everyone has some capacity to decide where they want to contribute based on their experience and passion, teams are formed with a mix of people and profiles, known as squads, which include diverse skill sets" (Beta, Senior 2). Nonetheless, this freedom can lead to gaps in task allocation, especially in relation to those activities perceived as less desirable or peripheral, raising coordination concerns if no one feels directly responsible.

To mitigate these risks, accountability and coordination mechanisms are essential. In the absence of shared objectives and peer feedback, decentralized action may lead to redundancy, uneven contributions, or confusion over roles. The effectiveness of self-management appears closely tied to the clarity of shared goals and the quality of communication among team members.

3.4 Ample transparency

Ample transparency emerged as a foundational feature across the organizations studied, reflecting a cultural commitment to openness in information sharing to foster trust, collaboration, and informed decision-making. Rather than being treated as a discrete policy, transparency was embedded in both the ethos and daily operations of the firms. Two key dimensions were identified in this component: *normalized transparency* and *unrestricted access to information*. While this approach helped strengthen alignment and empowerment, it also presented risks, particularly when the volume or complexity of information was not accompanied by interpretive support or prioritization mechanisms. In such cases, openness could lead to ambiguity or information overload.

(i) **Normalized transparency** captures the extent to which openness is institutionalized as a core organizational expectation, rather than framed as an optional or exceptional behavior. Transparency was seen not just as a mechanism for accountability, but as a normative value that shaped how strategy, performance, and processes were communicated and understood. As one executive explained, “radical transparency is one of our critical self-management principles. It involves absolute access to information, except in matters related to personal privacy” (Gamma, Executive 1). Another participant echoed this view, noting that “transparency is part of our culture. Everyone knows the strategy and the processes” (Kappa, Senior 1). These examples underscore that transparency is not confined to leadership practices but is diffused throughout the organizational culture. However, this assumption of universal transparency can require significant adjustment for employees unfamiliar with such norms, especially in organizations transitioning from more hierarchical or information-restrictive settings.

(ii) **Unrestricted access to information** goes beyond cultural expectations to describe a deliberate structural choice to share data and insights widely, treating information as a collective asset rather than a managerial privilege. This open access fosters decentralized decision-making, encourages real-time responsiveness, and supports cross-functional collaboration. As one senior leader remarked, “Information is shared openly to accelerate innovation” (Sigma, Senior 1), while another participant emphasized that “we are not a secretive company at all. Practically everything is available to everyone” (Gamma, Analyst 1).

Beyond formal policies, this principle is reinforced by everyday interactions and behaviors that normalize knowledge exchange. The democratization of strategic and financial data was particularly salient, signaling a high-trust environment in which all employees are invited to understand and contribute to organizational performance. This dynamic helped build shared ownership and engagement. However, this openness also created the need for interpretive frameworks or filtering mechanisms to help employees navigate large volumes of information, particularly in fast-paced or complex contexts where signal-to-noise ratios may vary.

Overall, these findings suggest that ample transparency operates as both a cultural value and a structural enabler. It dismantles traditional information asymmetries, empowering employees to act with a fuller understanding of the organizational landscape. In doing so, it supports a shift toward more participatory and inclusive governance structures, where decision-making is informed by shared intelligence and collective awareness.

3.5 Collaborative and boundaryless workflows

Collaborative and boundaryless workflows were consistently observed across the five case organizations as a defining feature of their unconventional design logics, characterized by fluid cooperation that transcends formal hierarchies and predefined roles. This dimension encompasses two closely connected aspects: *collaborative decision-making* and *collective intelligence*. Together, these elements enable the mobilization of distributed knowledge, foster inclusive participation, and support organizational responsiveness. However, while these dynamics fostered flexibility and innovation, they also posed coordination risks. In this vein, unclear delineation of roles or overlapping responsibilities occasionally slowed down execution or complicated accountability, especially in the absence of explicit alignment mechanisms.

(i) **Collaborative decision-making** refers to the use of participatory structures and practices that replace conventional top-down control with joint problem-solving and distributed authority. Instead of decisions being made exclusively by top management, these organizations encouraged employees at all levels to contribute to the design and refinement of business solutions. One participant described this as “a collaborative consulting model where everyone contributes solutions without hierarchies” (Kappa, Analyst 1). In operational terms, these practices were supported by flexible team configurations (often referred to as *squads)* which enabled people to engage based on their expertise, interests, or professional aspirations. A

senior leader explained: “since everyone has some capacity to decide where they want to contribute based on their experience and passion, teams with a mix of people and profiles are created, known as squads, which include professionals from different backgrounds” (Beta, Senior 2). These collaborative practices enriched problem-solving processes, yet they also required effort to manage divergent perspectives and maintain clarity in decision-making timelines.

(ii) **Collective intelligence** builds upon this collaborative ethos by creating conditions for continuous knowledge-sharing, peer learning, and co-development of resources. Rather than restricting knowledge to specific units or functions, employees engaged in open-ended knowledge exchanges facilitated by communities of practice and accessible communication channels. One executive emphasized that “the absence of barriers in collaboration allows collective knowledge to grow exponentially every day” (Sigma, Senior 1). Participants described regular routines of sharing resources proactively, such as templates, proposals, or learnings from prior projects, which others could then adapt and reuse. As one analyst illustrated: “let's not make others spend another three days on this. Share it and let them take what they need, mold it, adapt it, but let's have a common starting point, and knowledge will ultimately be transferred” (Gamma, Analyst 1).

This ethos of openness was further reinforced by multidirectional communication structures, where employees were encouraged to distribute information proactively across teams. As one participant noted, “it is very common here to notify the community saying we have presented this proposal to a specific client, in case someone wants to use it for their projects” (Kappa, Analyst 1). Similarly, a senior executive highlighted the importance of such flows: “we create an environment where information flows freely to strengthen the team” (Zeta, Executive 2). These practices helped reduce silos and increased the pace at which teams could access and apply relevant knowledge. Still, the effectiveness of such systems depended on implicit norms and boundary-setting routines; without them, shared ownership could blur individual accountability or dilute decision rights.

In summary, the analysis shows that collaborative and boundaryless workflows are instrumental in fostering adaptability, inclusive decision-making, and organizational learning. At the same time, they require thoughtful orchestration and supportive routines to manage complexity and maintain coherence. By embedding collaboration and distributed knowledge practices into their everyday operations, the organizations studied demonstrated how

alternative organizing logics can function as viable substitutes to hierarchical control, enabling responsiveness without undermining strategic alignment.

3.6 Adaptive governance

Adaptive governance emerged across the five case organizations as a central pillar of their unconventional OD, illustrating a transition toward flexible, decentralized, and expertise-based governance systems. In contrast to traditional hierarchical arrangements, these organizations relied on governance mechanisms designed to reconcile distributed autonomy with strategic alignment. While this configuration fostered responsiveness and initiative, it also introduced coordination challenges. Broad distribution of decision-making authority may complicate execution and timely alignment if not accompanied by shared protocols and clearly defined roles. This dimension comprises five interrelated elements: agile and flat structures, decentralized decision-making, expertise-based authority, participatory governance, and ritualized cultural reinforcement.

(i) **Agile and flat structures** refer to organizational configurations that reduce hierarchical layers and formal authority, removing bureaucratic obstacles to accelerate innovation and responsiveness. Supervisory roles are minimized, and formal titles carry less weight in determining decision rights. One executive illustrated this logic, remarking, “We eliminated hierarchies so that the best idea always moves forward” (Sigma, Executive 1). Another emphasized how dismantling formal layers fostered initiative and collaboration: “We have removed traditional managerial layers, so decisions are no longer dictated solely by rank” (Gamma, Executive 1).

(ii) **Decentralized decision-making** reinforces these agile structures by situating decision rights closer to operational reality. Teams are empowered to act autonomously, equipped with strategic information and the expectation to take ownership. As one executive explained, “decisions are made in a decentralized way. Teams with macro-level information can act with knowledge and accountability” (Beta, Executive 1). Another participant elaborated on the cultural norms supporting this model: “people participate in the decision-making process. Frameworks are set, but leadership does not dictate decisions based purely on hierarchy” (Gamma, Executive 1).

(iii) **Expertise-based authority** further enhances adaptability by aligning decision-making power with relevant knowledge and experience, rather than hierarchical position. This shift

supports faster, more grounded decisions, and reduces reliance on formal reporting lines. Employees noted that accessible information and horizontal structures enable them to lead when they hold subject matter expertise. As one analyst expressed, “having accessible information and no opaque hierarchies empowers us to make informed decisions” (Kappa, Analyst 1).

(iv) **Participatory governance** adds a layer of collective oversight and peer accountability to this decentralized model. Employees are actively involved in shaping governance routines, reinforcing role clarity and shared responsibility. This is particularly salient in processes such as hiring or evaluation, where input from multiple stakeholders ensures cultural fit and organizational alignment. As one executive put it, “we emphasize collaborative governance, ensuring that individuals understand their roles while contributing to collective decision-making” (Gamma, Executive 1).

(v) **Ritualized cultural reinforcement** plays a vital role in sustaining coherence across these decentralized systems. Organizations formalize cultural routines, such as team rituals, shared meals, or symbolic practices, that reinforce belonging and help socialize decision norms. These rituals offer continuity and emotional grounding, particularly in settings with fluid roles and limited hierarchy. One executive illustrated this point: “we institutionalize rituals to reinforce cultural values, strengthening the sense of belonging within our teams” (Gamma, Executive 1). Regular working breakfasts or informal check-ins serve both to advance projects and to foster team cohesion.

Overall, adaptive governance in these organizations was not merely a function of less hierarchy. It required the active construction of new coordinating mechanisms capable of sustaining autonomy without losing cohesion. By embedding distributed decision rights within culturally reinforced and expertise-led structures, these firms maintained responsiveness while avoiding fragmentation. However, in the absence of middle management, the burden of coordination and conflict resolution often shifted to peer-based systems. These informal arrangements proved effective only when accompanied by shared routines and clear interpretive frameworks. In this way, adaptive governance provided the organizational scaffolding necessary for distributed authority to operate reliably in practice.

3.7 Disruptive and continuous innovation

Disruptive and continuous innovation operated in the studied organizations as a foundational enabler rather than a discrete function, sustaining the rest of the organizational components through a pervasive orientation towards experimentation, iteration, and learning from failure. This dimension was not confined to R&D units or innovation departments but embedded in everyday work dynamics across all roles and levels. While this approach energized teams and promoted adaptability, it also introduced risks of overload or strategic dispersion if not adequately bounded. The dimension comprises two interrelated components: continuous improvement mindset and disruptive innovation practices.

(i) **Continuous improvement mindset** reflects an orientation in which mistakes are framed as learning opportunities rather than performance failures. Employees are encouraged to assume responsibility, reflect on outcomes, and collaboratively devise solutions. This mindset supports rapid feedback loops and reinforces accountability in a non-punitive environment. As one senior participant put it, “part of self-management is to say, I take responsibility. In this case, the team discusses it: Let’s analyze how we can prevent this from happening again. If something happens once, it’s fine, but if it happens repeatedly, we must find a solution” (Gamma, Senior). This iterative attitude was also linked to a 'fail fast' philosophy, as described by another executive: “fail fast is incentivized; we learn from each attempt and adjust accordingly” (Kappa, Executive 1).

However, some organizations noted that sustaining this mindset depended on collective reflection mechanisms and team maturity. Without shared evaluation practices, the drive for constant improvement could devolve into unfocused experimentation. Moreover, the cultural shift required for embracing failure as learning was not always easy to instill—especially when recruiting from talent markets where traditional performance expectations prevail.

(ii) **Disruptive innovation practices** further extend this learning orientation by actively encouraging experimentation, risk-taking, and questioning established procedures. These organizations specially recognized and incentivized the pursuit of unconventional solutions and viewed mistakes not as liabilities but as signals of boldness and initiative. One executive captured this view succinctly: “we like people to take risks. And we have a clear indicator: if someone always gets things right, that’s actually a bad sign” (Beta, Executive 1). Another participant emphasized how this approach facilitated responsiveness to complex challenges:

“to overcome complex situations, we must adopt new ways of organizing work that allow us to increase execution speed and respond more effectively” (Kappa, Senior 1).

Yet, fostering disruption on a continuous basis also entailed potential drawbacks. In the absence of clear evaluative criteria or strategic prioritization, the proliferation of initiatives could lead to fatigue, duplication, or dilution of focus. Participants acknowledged that distinguishing between scalable innovations and transient experiments remained a key organizational challenge.

In sum, disruptive and continuous innovation was not treated as a separate layer of activity, but as a transversal principle shaping organizational behavior and design. Its presence enabled greater adaptability, fluidity, and responsiveness in the studied firms. At the same time, its effective implementation required deliberate boundaries and consolidation mechanisms to transform iterative learning into sustainable organizational change.

3.8 Sustainable impact

Sustainable impact emerged in the studied organizations as a meta-component that, alongside innovation, provides an orienting framework for the configuration and functioning of their organizational design. While these firms emphasize agility, innovation, and decentralization, the integration of sustainable impact ensures that design choices are not solely optimized for internal efficiency or employee autonomy but also aligned with broader societal values and a sense of collective responsibility. This component comprises three interrelated elements: psychological safety, employee flexibility, and social impact. However, embedding these values in everyday practice also entails navigating the tensions between aspirational goals and operational constraints, particularly in contexts marked by limited resources or shifting priorities.

(i) Psychological safety plays a key role in cultivating inclusive and trusting environments where individuals feel confident to share their perspectives, raise concerns, and engage in critical dialogue without fear of adverse consequences. Respondents described an atmosphere where expressing ideas is not only permitted but encouraged, reinforcing a culture based on respect and openness. As one analyst explained, “I have zero fear of expressing my creative ideas. I feel they are listened to and considered to improve our strategies” (Kappa, Analyst 1). This sense of safety is supported by informal and formal channels that enable greater upward communication. One participant commented, “I know that I can say things to my superiors here that I would never have been able to say in other companies” (Gamma, Analyst 2). Nonetheless,

sustaining psychological safety can become more complex as firms grow or confront increased performance pressures, especially when the expectation of openness is not accompanied by clarity in roles, responsibilities, or feedback processes.

(ii) Employee flexibility is another defining feature of the organizations examined. It refers to the adaptability of work arrangements across spatial, temporal, and procedural dimensions. Rather than relying on fixed workstations or standard routines, these companies employ dynamic practices that encourage collaboration and responsiveness. One executive described their approach as follows: “We set up a rotational seating system where every few weeks, people change places to expand their networks and collaborate with different colleagues” (Gamma, Executive 1).

Beyond physical space, these organizations promote flexible attendance practices, where in-person presence is driven by the nature of collaborative tasks rather than prescriptive requirements. The flexibility also extends to methods of working: employees are encouraged to adapt their approaches depending on project demands and personal strengths. As one analyst noted, “We have a lot of diversity... There is no single methodology. Mixing profiles that wouldn’t fit in a rigid process gives you a lot of freedom – I don’t have a manual on how to manage projects” (Gamma, Analyst 1). At the same time, this autonomy requires careful coordination; in the absence of shared routines or expectations, individualized working styles may lead to inefficiencies or misalignment in team-based tasks.

These observations suggest that flexibility is not simply a matter of convenience but a deliberate design choice that enables these organizations to respond to changing conditions while fostering engagement and innovation.

(iii) Social impact reflects a broader understanding of the role of business in society. The organizations studied do not conceive of their purpose as limited to profit generation but rather frame their mission in terms of contributing to societal well-being and ethical business conduct. One executive challenged mainstream assumptions, saying, “I argue with my business owners, friends of mine, when they say companies are just for making money. I tell them that’s a lie, that’s not healthy. Companies are not for making money – shareholders are, and that’s different” (Beta, Executive 1). Others emphasized their aim to act as role models in responsible practices: “our mission is to lead by example in ethical business practices and social responsibility” (Kappa, Executive 1). The aspiration to align innovation with social

contribution was also present: “innovation is not just about commercial success but also about social progress” (Sigma, Analyst 1).

Yet, translating these ideals into consistent organizational practices can be difficult, especially in the face of commercial pressures. When resources are scarce or priorities shift, sustaining initiatives aligned with social purposes can become more complex and require difficult trade-offs.

Taken together, the evidence suggests that sustainable impact is not treated as an ancillary concern but is embedded in the values, routines, and decision-making processes of these firms. Through the prioritization of psychological safety, flexible working arrangements, and societal engagement, these organizations create environments that are simultaneously responsive, inclusive, and purpose driven. At the same time, maintaining this orientation demands ongoing attention to the alignment between organizational values, available resources, and strategic choices. Importantly, sustainable impact functions as a normative anchor: it ensures that the pursuit of agility, innovation, and autonomy is tempered by a commitment to human and societal flourishing.

Table 9. Additional illustrative quotations supporting key findings

Aggregate component	*Second order themes*	*Supporting quotes*
Responsible freedom	Trusted autonomy	By default, we work autonomously, making decisions within our scope without constantly seeking others’ input. (Zeta, Analyst 1)
		Gamma encourages autonomous decision-making. Yes, you may consult others, but trust is paramount. (Gamma, Executive 2)
	Self-management and accountability	I have the freedom to organize my time and focus on what I do best. (Beta, Analyst 3)
		I know exactly what is expected of me, and I have the freedom and support to meet my responsibilities without micromanagement. (Zeta, Analyst 1)
Ample transparency	Normalized transparency	All information is shared in a company-wide forum, which is basically a breakfast we have together. There’s also a monthly meeting to review the company’s finances and so on, and that’s where they let us know if any new measures will be implemented. (Gamma, Analyst 1)
		Trust has increased significantly, and transparency has too. It’s true that some people struggle to get on board with this approach and find it hard to adapt or grow into it. (Beta, Executive 1)

Aggregate component	*Second order themes*	*Supporting quotes*
	Unrestricted access to information	Information is a shared resource—no one person "owns" it; it belongs to the company. Self-service is our norm. (Sigma, Executive 1)
		Access to information and digitalization are partly what's dismantling the hierarchy. Before, middle management made sense as the information chain, but now that chain is gone. I can find experts in my organization directly, without going through my boss and up the chain. (Gamma, Executive 1)
Collaborative and boundaryless workflows	Collaborative decision making	If anyone has questions, we meet, talk, and discuss, but no one dictates what or how things must be done. We set guidelines to focus on our work, and then each person is free to implement them as they see fit. We reviewed it afterward. (Gamma, Senior 4)
		Efficiency alone isn't enough; we seek comfort and growth. We're all part of a collaborative community. (Kappa, Analyst 2)
	Collective intelligence	So, it's decentralized so that ultimately collective intelligence can really help evaluate and understand. (Gamma, Executive 1)
		I participate in communities of practice to grow through shared knowledge. (Kappa, Analyst 2)
Adaptive governance	Agile and flat structure	Communication in any direction in the organization is our advantage; we remove hierarchical barriers so everyone can contribute to success. (Kappa, Executive 1)
		We also started to organize the company in a way that we wanted teams to have autonomy, right? So, we don't have big structures or departments; in some way, we dissolve that idea of departmentalization. (Gamma, Executive 1)
	Decentralized decision making	In our industrial company, decision-making is agile and driven by expertise, ensuring that decisions are made where the knowledge resides. (Beta, Senior 1)
		Authority is distributed. And in every session, there's always a facilitator who ensures the methodology is followed. (Beta, Senior 1)
	Expertise-Driven decision-making	Our consultants are empowered to make decisions based on their experience and expertise. (Kappa, Executive 1)
		Flexibility and autonomy are key pillars at Beta; every employee is a leader in their domain. (Beta, Executive 1)
	Participative governance	It sort of goes through many people's feedback, so we can all say if we think that person would fit or not, or whether they could be involved. It's a way of taking the collective pulse. (Gamma, Senior 2)

Aggregate component	*Second order themes*	*Supporting quotes*
		Roles have a very clear purpose and defined responsibilities, and if they have a certain boundary, it's super clear and completely spelled out. What each person does is transparent, so anyone can see and read it—it doesn't add complexity; it just clarifies everything. (Beta, Executive 1)
	Ritual driven culture reinforcement	"Curious breakfasts" are a tradition. We cover varied topics, with no formality. (Gamma, Analyst 2)
		Zeta trusts its people. Personal connections strengthen our culture. (Zeta, Executive 1)
Disruptive and continuous innovation	Continuous improvement mindset	Failing is part of the innovation process. We measure risk, but we're not afraid to try. Responsibility is individual. (Sigma, Executive 1)
		We encourage "fail fast." Here, learning from mistakes is part of our culture, and there's no fear of making errors as long as you handle them responsibly. (Zeta, Senior 1)
	Disruptive innovation	A new person who dares to ask anything—that's encouraged. People should ask questions even if they've just arrived and are new. We allow and incentivize it. Whenever that happens, we celebrate it, even if the questions initially seem irrelevant. (Gamma, Executive 1)
		There are no barriers, only innovative solutions. (Beta, Executive 1)
Sustainable impact	Psychological safety	I advocate so-called "soft" concepts in the company: love in the workplace, employee happiness—of course, that's the goal, isn´t it?. (Gamma, Executive 1)
		Beyond seeking productivity and delivering good products and services to our clients, we aim to make a meaningful impact on the lives of our employees, helping them be happier in their own lives. (Beta, Executive 1)
		There's no culture of punishment or "this mistake will define you forever." There's a certain proactiveness in supporting someone who makes an error, especially if they're less experienced. (Gamma, Executive 1)
	Employee flexibility	We trust individual responsibility: flexible schedules and choosing where to work. (Beta, Analyst 2)
		Right, nobody has an office, and nobody has fixed spots. (Gamma, Analyst 2)
	Social impact	Companies aren't just their shareholders; they are much more than that. (Gamma, Executive 1)

Aggregate component	*Second order themes*	*Supporting quotes*
		Our ambition is to create a better world. We want to put our talent to work for a purpose: creating digital products that help build a better world. (Sigma, Senior 1)

Source: own elaboration

3.9 Contextual expressions and trade-offs of unconventional OD

While the six components emerged as recurrent across all five cases, their concrete expression varied considerably across organizations. For instance, communities of practice, a key feature of collaborative and boundaryless workflows, were present in every firm, but took different forms: in one company, they operated as formalized peer-learning programs connected to onboarding and cross-project integration, whereas in another, they consisted of informal, agenda-free weekly gatherings. Likewise, responsible freedom was implemented through different mechanisms, ranging from full flexibility in working hours and location to four-day workweeks structured around self-managed goals. These variations reflect how the same underlying principles were adapted to distinct organizational contexts and needs, underscoring the configurational nature of unconventional OD.

Our findings also suggest that these components are not merely structural components but reflect critical trade-offs that organizations must navigate. For instance, responsible freedom requires balancing autonomy with accountability; adaptive governance must reconcile structure with flexibility; collaborative and boundaryless workflows depends on openness while maintaining efficiency; and sustainable impact involves aligning short-term business imperatives with long-term societal commitments. These tensions will be further examined in the discussion, illustrating how unconventional ODs manage these competing demands to remain adaptive and effective.

Responsible freedom poses critical trade-offs that organizations need to balance carefully. While autonomy and self-management can spur innovation, they also risk overwork, particularly in high-expectation contexts where employees self-govern their workload. Additionally, staff are expected to shoulder extensive accountability for outcomes, potentially heightening pressure and reinforcing an “always-on” dynamic. Moreover, relying on individualized workflows can breed inefficiencies, as diverse processes hamper coordination and diminish organizational effectiveness. Aligning autonomy with accountability is thus vital to sustaining both employee well-being and collective performance.

The decentralization inherent in self-management and autonomy also requires accountability and mechanisms to ensure alignment with strategic objectives. While employees are empowered to allocate their own work and make decisions, this increased flexibility raises the complexity of coordination and strategic coherence, particularly in organizations undergoing scaling processes. The absence of formalized decision-making structures may lead to inconsistencies in execution, slowing down key processes, and creating friction between individual agencies and collective organizational goals.

These trade-offs underscore the dynamic nature of responsible freedom, where autonomy and accountability must be carefully calibrated to sustain both employee well-being and operational efficiency. While this approach can make organizations more adaptive and resilient, its effectiveness ultimately depends on how they mitigate tensions between flexibility and control, empowerment and alignment, and autonomy and standardization.

While transparency strengthens decision-making autonomy, it also introduces critical trade-offs that organizations must navigate. First, while transparency can enhance trust, excessive or unfiltered information-sharing may overwhelm employees and lead to decision fatigue. In organizations with ample transparency, employees may be burdened with processing high volumes of strategic and operational data, potentially diverting focus from core responsibilities. Second, the democratization of sensitive business intelligence, particularly financial and strategic data, raises concerns about confidentiality and misinterpretation. Employees without financial expertise may struggle to accurately contextualize complex data, leading to potential misunderstandings or misaligned expectations. While transparency is intended to foster inclusion, unrestricted access to sensitive information can inadvertently create anxiety or unrealistic performance pressures if employees feel excessively exposed to financial fluctuations or strategic uncertainties. Third, although increased transparency is intended to democratize information and foster trust, some individuals can be challenged by this, potentially hindering their organizational maturation.

When it comes to collaborative and boundaryless workflows, there emerges a clear need for balance between team autonomy and organizational cohesion. Problems reconciling collaborative efforts with individual responsibilities surface in some of these organizations, presenting a need for flexible but solid decision-making protocols, defining roles and expectations, and fostering a culture that values both teamwork and individual accountability.

Adaptive governance also introduces critical trade-offs that organizations must navigate. The removal of hierarchical controls and the emphasis on participative and expertise-driven decision-making can result in ambiguity, coordination challenges, and inefficiencies in execution. One of the most notable trade-offs observed in our study was tension in collaboration, where the push for collective governance sometimes led to friction between employees. While collaboration improves decision quality and engagement, excessive reliance on participatory mechanisms can slow down processes and create frustration, particularly when decision-making rights are unclear.

In terms of disruptive and continuous, a key trade-off identified in our study is the tension between continuous experimentation and operational efficiency. While a culture of ongoing iteration accelerates learning, it can also lead to decision fatigue, uncertainty, and difficulty in prioritization. Organizations that do not establish clear boundaries for experimentation may experience over-experimentation, where constant iteration prevents projects from reaching execution and scaling phases. Furthermore, the democratization of risk-taking can create disparities in accountability, as employees who consistently engage in bold experimentation may receive greater visibility and recognition than those who focus on maintaining operational stability.

Finally, commitment to sustainable impact also introduces trade-offs, particularly in balancing idealistic missions with economic sustainability. While embedding purpose into OD enhances employee motivation and stakeholder trust, it also raises practical concerns about financial viability and strategic focus.

3.10 Conclusions

The findings presented in this chapter provide an empirically grounded account of the core components and systemic dynamics that characterize unconventional OD in the five case study organizations. Across all firms, the data reveal a consistent reliance on six interrelated components (responsible freedom, ample transparency, collaborative and boundaryless workflows, adaptive governance, disruptive and continuous innovation, and sustainable impact) each of which contributes to how these organizations structure, coordinate, and adapt their internal functioning.

Rather than operating in isolation, these components form a mutually reinforcing configuration. Disruptive and continuous innovation, alongside sustainable impact, operates as a meta-layer

that conditions and sustains the enactment of the other elements. Responsible freedom, ample transparency, and collaborative workflows are tightly coupled, enabling distributed action, knowledge flow, and informal coordination. Adaptive governance serves as the backbone that holds this system together, offering mechanisms for alignment and decision integrity in the absence of conventional hierarchy.

In addition to identifying shared patterns, the chapter has highlighted the contextual variations in how these components are expressed and combined. Importantly, the findings underscore that unconventional OD is not the result of a single best practice or ideal type, but rather a dynamic configuration shaped by deliberate choices and situated adaptations. Each component embodies a set of trade-offs (between autonomy and coordination, openness and clarity, participation and efficiency, experimentation and consolidation) that organizations must navigate over time.

Taken together, this chapter suggests that unconventional OD is not merely a collection of innovative practices, but a coherent, albeit fluid, design logic. The next chapter builds on these findings to theorize the implications of this design logic, further examining the interplay of its components and the tensions it generates and positioning it within the broader literature on OD.

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Chapter 4. Discussion

4.1 Introduction

This chapter achieves two complementary goals. First, it synthesizes the empirical findings of the study in light of the overarching research goal of the present thesis: to advance theoretical understanding of unconventional organizational design (OD) by identifying and analyzing its constitutive dimensions, their mutual interdependencies, the tensions they generate, and their organizational outcomes. Second, drawing on existing scholarship, it situates these emergent components within broader debates on the key domains of OD, thereby offering a more integrated conceptual interpretation of how design operates in unconventional settings.

Building on the within-case and cross-case analyses presented in the previous chapter, the discussion unfolds in three steps. It begins by revisiting the central and subsidiary research questions that guided the inquiry, reaffirming their analytical relevance in interpreting the results. It then articulates the main insights derived from the study, emphasizing the systemic nature of unconventional OD and the interdependencies, synergies, and trade-offs among its core components.

Importantly, while the empirical analysis inductively surfaced six recurring design components (responsible freedom, ample transparency, collaborative and boundaryless workflows, adaptive governance, disruptive and continuous innovation, and sustainable impact) their relevance extends beyond descriptive categorization. In line with the conceptual framework developed in Chapter 1, which proposed three key domains of OD (organizational structure, coordination and communication systems, and organizational culture) this chapter also considers how the six emergent components empirically reflect, traverse, and at times reconfigure these domains.

Although a systematic mapping of the six components onto the three OD domains exceeds the scope of this study and would require a more targeted research design, this discussion offers a set of grounded interpretive reflections on their conceptual alignment. This integrative effort seeks to bridge inductive findings with established theoretical anchors in OD scholarship (Galbraith, 1974; Burton et al., 2006; Romme, 2019), supporting a dialog between data-driven insights and theoretically grounded domains of OD.

4.2 Underlying research questions

The intellectual foundation and empirical orientation of this thesis are anchored in a central research aim: to advance theoretical understanding of unconventional OD by identifying and analysing the fundamental elements, herein conceptualized as components, that recurrently characterize organizational arrangements which deliberately depart from conventional hierarchical forms. Responding to the fragmented and often model-specific nature of existing literature, the study adopts an exploratory posture, seeking to inductively theorize from empirical data rather than impose predefined categorizations.

As stated in the introduction, the overarching aim of this thesis was to identify and analyze the components that recurrently characterize organizations seeking to move beyond conventional organizational designs. To operationalize this aim, four research questions were formulated, guiding both the empirical exploration and the analytical framing of the study:

RQ1: What are the components that characterize unconventional OD?

RQ2: How are these components interrelated, and what is the significance of their interaction in shaping organizational dynamics?

RQ3: To what extent do these elements generate internal tensions or trade-offs, and how are such tensions managed or resolved within organizational practice?

RQ4: What organizational outcomes are associated with the adoption and configuration of these components?

While RQ1 served as the foundation for identifying the core components emerging across the five case studies, RQ2, RQ3, and RQ4 enabled a deeper analysis of their systemic interplay, inherent tensions, and associated outcomes. Together, these questions allowed the research to move beyond static descriptions, providing a dynamic and context-sensitive account of how unconventional OD are assembled and enacted.

The following sections of this chapter engage directly with each of these questions, drawing on the empirical insights of the study to connect the findings with relevant theoretical perspectives. Rather than offering a universal model, the discussion provides a critical reflection about how the six components identified were made actionable in the organizations

studied, and what insights they offer for rethinking organizational design in contemporary contexts.

4.3 Overall discussion

This study uncovered six interrelated components (responsible freedom, ample transparency, collaborative and boundaryless workflows, adaptive governance, disruptive and continuous innovation, and sustainable impact) that were consistently present across the five cases analyzed, shedding light on how unconventional OD may be enacted in practice. In line with recent scholarly calls for more fine-grained accounts of emerging organizational forms (Hamel, 2011; Romme, 2019), the findings indicate that non-hierarchical arrangements tend to rely on a constellation of mutually supportive and interdependent elements, rather than on a single structural adjustment. While these components appeared simultaneously and often functioned synergistically in the studied organizations, we do not present them as a prescriptive or unified model. Instead, we acknowledge that they are neither collectively necessary nor individually sufficient, and that their adoption may be modular or selective, contingent upon the specific context of each organization, an observation aligned with Puranam et al.'s (2014) conceptualization of novel organizational forms as hybrid assemblages of established design elements.

These findings further suggest that the emergence of such configurations is driven not only by explicit strategic intent but also by ongoing adaptation to sector-specific contingencies and managerial discretion (Heusinkveld and Smits, 2025). While traditional organizations may incorporate isolated practices such as localized self-management or selective transparency, extant literature stresses that meaningful transformation stems from the systemic and cohesive integration of these elements (Hamel, 2011; Lee and Edmondson, 2017). Our results reinforce this perspective, indicating that the durability of unconventional OD hinges not only on the complementarity of its components but also on the active negotiation of the inherent trade-offs and tensions each of these entails.

Responsible freedom refers to the deliberate granting of autonomy to employees in the execution of their day-to-day responsibilities, while simultaneously holding them accountable for outcomes. This notion is consistent with longstanding theoretical perspectives suggesting that increased job latitude is positively associated with enhanced engagement and creativity (Mayer et al., 1995; Schoorman et al., 2007). However, ODs that rely predominantly on trust-based autonomy may face coordination challenges, particularly when localized decision-

making occurs without the support of shared alignment mechanisms (Lee and Edmondson, 2017). In the cases analyzed, employees frequently initiated workflows and selected tools independently, reinforcing decentralized authority. Yet this autonomy, in the absence of synchronizing routines or structures, risked operational fragmentation. This observation echoes prior scholarship indicating that in contexts characterized by high autonomy and interdependent tasks, the unpredictability of individual actions imposes substantial coordination demands (Puranam et al., 2012).

From a design standpoint, this phenomenon straddles all three key domains of OD. Structurally, responsible freedom reflects a deliberate decoupling from rigid hierarchical control and formal reporting lines (Burton et al., 2006), privileging distributed decision-making as a core design logic. In terms of coordination systems, it necessitates adaptive routines, such as alignment meetings or transparent decision protocols, to maintain coherence in the face of decentralized action (Galbraith, 1974; Joseph and Gaba, 2020). Culturally, its viability depends on shared norms of mutual accountability and psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999; Gulati and Puranam, 2009), which underpin responsible enactment of autonomy.

In smaller or early-stage firms, informal coordination mechanisms may suffice; however, as organizational complexity increases, informal practices often give way to more structured forms of alignment, such as periodic team meetings or shared dashboards. This finding underscores that responsible freedom does not thrive in the absence of structure, but rather within carefully crafted design frameworks that balance autonomy and accountability. Although self-management may foster innovation and engagement, it also carries risks, including burnout, misalignment, and inefficiencies, particularly when individualized workflows reduce shared visibility. As firms scale, the absence of formalized decision-making channels can lead to strategic drift or role confusion. These dynamics highlight that responsible freedom, when enacted as a core design principle, requires precise calibration between flexibility and control across structure, coordination, and culture.

Ample transparency surfaced as a pervasive and operationalized feature across the organizations examined, characterized by the active and intentional dissemination of strategic, operational, and financial information. Rather than remaining a normative aspiration, transparency was embedded in daily practices, such as granting employees access to role-relevant data and organizing interpretive sessions to contextualize key performance indicators. These mechanisms collectively contributed to fostering shared responsibility, organizational

alignment, and conditions of trust that enabled broader participation in decision-making (Bernstein, 2017).

The salience of transparency within these firms reflects its centrality across the three key domains of OD. Structurally, it challenges traditional information asymmetries by decoupling access to strategic intelligence from formal hierarchical position (Mintzberg, 1979; Burton et al., 2006). At the level of coordination and communication systems, transparency enhances shared situational awareness and facilitates distributed decision-making yet simultaneously introduces demands for interpretive alignment and selective emphasis (Joseph and Gaba, 2020). Culturally, transparency is sustained by norms of openness, mutual trust, and psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999; Schein, 2010), without which its effects can become counterproductive or even disorienting.

Indeed, while transparency enabled greater autonomy and engagement, it also revealed critical trade-offs. When information-sharing becomes excessive or unfiltered, employees may experience cognitive overload or ambiguity regarding priorities (Albu and Flyverbom, 2019). As several participants noted, the continuous flow of strategic updates and detailed metrics, particularly those related to financial performance, sometimes diverted attention from core responsibilities and contributed to uncertainty about which issues warranted action. These accounts echo Turco's (2016) findings, which underscore the paradoxical effects of unmediated strategic exposure: transparency can become simultaneously empowering and unsettling. In our study, the democratization of complex data raised interpretive challenges, especially for employees lacking specialized financial expertise or struggling with high levels of ambiguity. This led to occasional misalignment in expectations, anxiety, and reduced clarity of action.

To mitigate these risks, the studied firms invested in interpretive infrastructures, including regular framing sessions, explanatory meetings, and shared language conventions, designed to support sense-making and prevent misinterpretation. Rather than filtering or withholding information, the emphasis lay in building employees' capacity to navigate and make sense of what was shared. This reinforces the view of transparency as not merely a structural or technical feature, but as an ongoing, relational, and cognitive process embedded in cultural and communicative practices (Gulati and Puranam, 2009; Hatch and Schultz, 2002).

In sum, ample transparency, while instrumental in enabling distributed authority and aligning decentralized actors, must be carefully structured to avoid confusion and emotional fatigue. Its

effectiveness hinges on how it interacts with both coordination mechanisms and cultural norms. As such, its design must attend not only to openness per se, but to the broader interpretive and emotional infrastructure that enables employees to act on what they know.

Collaborative and boundaryless workflows manifest through organizational practices that reduce or dissolve formal departmental boundaries, thereby fostering cross-functional initiatives and multidisciplinary teamwork. This configuration builds upon the notion of collective intelligence (Heckscher and Adler, 2006), whereby the integration of diverse perspectives enhances problem-solving capabilities and innovation. In the organizations analyzed, interviewees recurrently described how teams coalesced around emergent challenges and later disbanded, often reorganizing in dynamic configurations. Such fluidity was perceived to expedite the circulation of ideas and relocate decision-making authority closer to relevant expertise, thereby enhancing lateral responsiveness and coordination.

This configuration interacts meaningfully with all three key domains of OD. Structurally, the attenuation of rigid departmental boundaries reflects a move toward more organic and flexible task allocation (Mintzberg, 1979; Galbraith, 1974). From a coordination and communication standpoint, these arrangements demand robust mechanisms, such as shared accountability frameworks and synchronous communication routines, to avoid drift and duplication (Joseph and Sengul, 2024; Burton et al., 2006). Culturally, the success of such workflows depends on shared norms of collaboration, mutual respect, and participatory engagement, all of which underpin the functioning of distributed teams (Schein, 2010; Edmondson and Harvey, 2018).

Nonetheless, the findings highlight important trade-offs associated with this model. While the capacity to reconfigure teams flexibly fosters adaptability, it can also compromise operational efficiency when decision rights and role demarcations remain ambiguous. Several participants reported uncertainty regarding when to seek broad-based input versus when to proceed autonomously. In response, some firms explicitly distinguished between issues requiring collective deliberation and those assigned to domain-specific experts, consistent with the logic of selective consensus proposed by Velyka and Guerzoni (2020). This practice enabled faster decision-making while safeguarding the integrity of decentralized authority.

The tension between team-level autonomy and overarching organizational coherence was a recurrent theme. Although cross-functional configurations facilitated agility and innovation, they occasionally generated confusion, redundancy, and strategic misalignment. To address this, organizations deployed flexible coordination mechanisms, including well-defined roles,

synchronization meetings, and distributed accountability systems, which helped maintain alignment without constraining team autonomy.

These insights reaffirm that boundaryless collaboration, when left unstructured, may exacerbate friction and coordination failures. Its effectiveness relies not merely on dismantling formal silos but on embedding intentional design elements that enable distributed work to function cohesively. As Puranam et al. (2012) argue, in contexts where interdependence is high and predictability is low, coordination requires carefully orchestrated information-processing routines and mutual adjustment mechanisms. Without such structures, the benefits of fluid collaboration may be undermined by escalating complexity and diminished clarity. Ultimately, collaborative and boundaryless workflows operate most effectively when anchored in coherent structural arrangements, supported by adaptive coordination infrastructures, and sustained by a participatory organizational culture.

Adaptive governance reflects a fundamental departure from fixed hierarchical authority structures, embracing instead governance models grounded in distributed decision-making and expertise-based leadership (Foss and Klein, 2012). In the organizations examined, formal chains of command were replaced by decentralized authority configurations, such as circles or squads, whose composition flexibly adapted to the knowledge and experience relevant to the task at hand. These groupings introduced a distinctive form of role clarity: one that was both fluid and purpose-oriented, allowing members to assume leadership in areas of domain-specific competence while remaining embedded in a system of collective deliberation.

This mode of governance interacts substantively with all three key domains of OD. Structurally, it replaces vertical control with more lateral and project-based forms of organizing (Galbraith, 1974; Burton, et al. 2006). From a coordination and communication perspective, it requires the orchestration of continuous feedback loops and explicit alignment mechanisms to synchronize distributed actions (Joseph and Sengul, 2024; Puranam et al., 2012). Culturally, it depends on shared norms of accountability, initiative, and mutual recognition of expertise as legitimate bases of authority (Schein, 2010; Edmondson and Harvey, 2018).

Despite its enabling capacity, particularly in terms of responsiveness and engagement, adaptive governance introduces significant design tensions. Participants highlighted recurring ambiguities, especially when initiatives spanned multiple teams or when the locus of decision authority was not clearly established. These ambiguities sometimes resulted in delayed action or friction among teams. To address such challenges, the organizations adopted periodic

alignment rituals and continuous clarification routines to reinforce role boundaries and maintain strategic coherence. These approaches are consistent with research on self-managing teams, which underscores the need for stable scaffolding, such as cultural norms and explicit guardrails, to ensure clarity and accountability in the absence of formal hierarchy (Lee and Edmondson, 2017).

Notwithstanding its advantages, adaptive governance is not without trade-offs. Shifting from hierarchical to participative and expertise-driven decision structures can lead to slower decision cycles, increased coordination complexity, and interpersonal tensions when accountability remains diffuse. While participative governance may enhance decision quality and inclusiveness, the absence of clear decision rights often led to frustration and inefficiencies, especially in contexts requiring timely responses or cross-team alignment.

These findings suggest that decentralization alone is insufficient to sustain organizational performance. Effective adaptive governance requires deliberate process design: not only to distribute authority, but to ensure that distributed decisions are made coherently, communicated transparently, and reconciled with overarching goals. In doing so, this governance logic supports organizational agility without sacrificing operational clarity. As with other components of unconventional OD, its viability hinges on how it is embedded within structural logics, coordination infrastructures, and culturally anchored practices that together support distributed autonomy while preserving collective cohesion.

Sustainable impact denotes a deliberate integration of concern for employee well-being and broader societal value into the organizational core, aligning with the growing body of literature on stakeholder-oriented strategies (Freeman et al., 2010). Rather than treating such commitments as peripheral or confined to corporate social responsibility initiatives, the organizations examined were embedding them directly into operational routines and strategic deliberations. Ethical considerations and community-oriented objectives are systematically discussed alongside financial goals, evidencing an intent to extend organizational responsibility beyond internal performance indicators (Margolis and Walsh, 2003).

This orientation intersects substantively with the three foundational domains of OD. Structurally, it manifests through practices and processes that institutionalize ethical commitments, such as employee support systems, community engagement initiatives, or impact-aligned project portfolios. From a coordination and communication standpoint, it entails internal mechanisms that legitimize dialogue around non-financial objectives and

balance competing priorities. Culturally, sustainable impact reinforces shared values and a collective sense of purpose, fostering affective commitment and long-term orientation among employees (Schein, 2010; Cameron and Quinn, 2011).

Participants consistently reported that such embeddedness of purpose enhances motivation, strengthens trust among stakeholders, and cultivates a sense of shared meaning across the organization. However, the empirical evidence also revealed critical tensions inherent in this approach. The pursuit of purpose-led strategies may place pressure on limited resources and diffuse strategic focus, especially in smaller or resource-constrained firms. Participants acknowledged that uncritical emphasis on aspirational goals, without attention to feasibility and prioritization, risked generating misalignment and disappointment.

To mitigate these risks, organizations engaged in open, collective sensemaking around the limitations of their impact efforts, fostering realistic expectations and prioritization. This highlights that sustaining a commitment to sustainable impact is not a symbolic gesture, but an ongoing, negotiated process, requiring deliberate calibration between normative aspirations and operational constraints. In this light, the enactment of purpose must be continuously reconciled with financial viability and organizational capacity, especially in fast-changing environments.

Ultimately, these findings suggest that sustainable impact, when treated as a core design principle rather than an ancillary initiative, may reinforce organizational resilience and ethical coherence. However, its effectiveness depends on how purpose is translated into practices that are both economically sustainable and socially meaningful, and how this translation is embedded within the organization's structure, coordination routines, and cultural identity.

An integrated view of the six components reveals both reinforcing synergies and inherent tensions. Responsible freedom is strengthened by open information flows, yet in the absence of careful filtering, such openness can lead to confusion or misalignment. Similarly, while collaborative workflows foster innovation and collective intelligence, excessive reliance on group consensus may decelerate decision-making processes. Adaptive governance redistributes authority and supports participative decision-making, but it can also generate ambiguity when responsibilities are not clearly defined. Disruptive and continuous innovation encourages rapid learning and experimentation, but the constant flux of initiatives may eventually lead to "pilot fatigue" among employees. A more tempered framing of this dynamic is to consider these practices as a constellation of design elements that promote trust-based

autonomy and iterative learning, while necessitating structured mechanisms to mitigate risks of misalignment or overload (Child and McGrath, 2001).

This interplay highlights a broader implication: reducing or eliminating hierarchical controls requires the intentional development of alternative coordination mechanisms to avoid organizational fragmentation. For example, when transparency was not adequately structured, it tended to produce ambiguity or cognitive strain that weakened effective self-management. Likewise, the success of collaborative workflows often hinged on the presence of adaptive governance mechanisms that delineated how decisions were to be made within cross-functional teams. Absent such scaffolding, collaborative efforts risked becoming inefficient or directionless.

Furthermore, while ample transparency and boundaryless workflows are strongly connected, they operate along with other distinct dimensions. Transparency pertains to the open dissemination of strategic, operational, and financial data across the organization, thereby enabling shared understanding. Boundaryless workflows, by contrast, emphasize fluid collaboration across teams, hierarchies, and functional boundaries. The former facilitates informed decision-making; the latter enhances lateral coordination. When implemented together, they reinforce a culture of openness through complementary channels.

As Puranam et al. (2012) note, when actors are unable to fully observe or predict one another's actions, coordination requires more intensive information exchange and mutual adjustment. In such contexts, hierarchy not only serves to allocate authority but also functions as a coordination device that reduces information-processing demands. Without it, organizations must instead rely on shared routines, interpretive frameworks, and relational practices to sustain coherence. Viewing these components as part of an interconnected system underscores how even small disruptions, such as reduced information-sharing, can have cascading effects throughout the broader OD.

Finally, in terms of practical implications emanating from this study, managers seeking to adopt such practices may want to consider a phased approach: introducing higher transparency alongside analytic support so employees can interpret key metrics, instituting smaller cross-functional pilot teams before overhauling the entire organization, or embedding social responsibilities into the strategic mission from the outset so that employees view these initiatives as integral rather than peripheral. Each move requires balancing empowerment with clarity, ensuring that employees do not suffer from role confusion or information overload.

Introducing these components in partial or incremental steps allows for iterative learning-a principle that resonates with the very notion of disruptive and continuous innovation (Cannon and Edmondson, 2005; Edmondson, 2011). In that sense, the best approach may be to treat the transition itself as an experiment, using structured reflection to decide how extensively or rapidly to roll out unconventional design features.

This approach aligns with broader discussions on OD, which emphasize that the success of unconventional OD does not stem from rigidly applying predefined models, but rather from adapting key principles to the specific needs and dynamics of each organization (Van Bree and Gonzalez, 2025).

4.4 Conclusions

The purpose of this chapter was to bridge the empirical findings with the overarching aim and guiding questions of the study. In doing so, the analysis illuminated the core components that underpin unconventional OD, as well as the interactions, trade-offs, and organizational outcomes associated with their implementation.

By identifying six interdependent dimensions, responsible freedom, ample transparency, collaborative and boundaryless workflows, adaptive governance, disruptive and continuous innovation, and sustainable impact, this study advances a systemic and dynamic view of unconventional OD. These components, while analytically distinct, are enacted in practice through mutual reinforcement and contextual alignment, offering a relational alternative to the structural rigidity of conventional OD models.

Importantly, the chapter has situated these findings within the broader conceptual architecture of OD developed in Chapter 1, showing how the six components empirically reflect and, in some cases, reconfigure the three key domains of OD: organizational structure, coordination and communication systems, and organizational culture. This analytical anchoring reinforces the theoretical contribution of the study, while also supporting a more integrated understanding of how design choices interact with underlying organizational logics.

The chapter has also highlighted the practical relevance of these insights by illustrating how organizations can navigate complexity and change through modular, iterative design experimentation. The contributions articulated underscore the value of examining OD not as a fixed model, but as an evolving configuration of interrelated design choices and organizational practices.

The next and final chapter of the thesis will reflect on the distinct contributions of this study, discuss its limitations, propose directions for future research and offer a personal reflection of the research journey.

Conclusion

This concluding chapter draws together the core contributions of the thesis, offering a reflective synthesis of its conceptual, empirical, and practical contributions.

Beyond summarizing results, the chapter aims to position these insights within the broader landscape of OD scholarship by articulating the distinct theoretical, empirical, and managerial contributions of this study. Thereafter, the chapter offers a detailed discussion of the limitations of the study. Third, building on the thesis' findings, several avenues for future research are proposed. Finally, the chapter comes to an end by offering a personal reflection of the research journey.

Positioning the findings within OD scholarship

The six emergent dimensions identified through the empirical analysis, responsible freedom, ample transparency, collaborative and boundaryless workflows, adaptive governance, disruptive and continuous innovation, and sustainable impact, advance the theoretical understanding of how OD operates beyond conventional paradigms. As discussed in Chapter 1, this thesis conceptualized OD along three interrelated domains: organizational structure, coordination and communication systems, and organizational culture. The findings reaffirm the interconnectedness of these domains and show how unconventional OD relies on their dynamic recombination. For instance, responsible freedom reconfigures structural hierarchies; ample transparency shifts coordination logics; and sustainable impact anchors cultural identity. This relational view underscores the importance of studying OD not as a static blueprint but as an evolving design ecosystem shaped by contextual adaptation, managerial intention, and collective sensemaking.

Research contributions

This research contributes to the field of OD in three distinct ways: conceptually, by offering an integrative framework that captures the core dimensions of unconventional OD; empirically, by providing rich qualitative evidence from five in-depth case studies; and practically, by outlining actionable insights for managers seeking to experiment with or transition toward unconventional design configurations.

(i) **Conceptually**, this study identifies the historic fragmentation in the literature on unconventional, post-bureaucratic and self-managing organizations (Hamel, 2011; Bernstein et al., 2016) and offers an integrative conceptualization. While existing research has explored models such as holacracy (Robertson, 2015), sociocracy (Buck and Endenburg, 2012), and teal organizations (Laloux, 2015), these are often presented as discrete, ideal-type categories with limited attention to their shared structural principles or underlying mechanisms. Additionally, this research examines and proposes a set of six recurring and interrelated dimensions that transcend specific models and capture the common essence of unconventional OD as an interrelated system.

Building on the work of Puranam et al. (2014), who conceptualize OD as a response to five universal organizing problems (division of labor, allocation, coordination, incentives, and governance), this study proposes that unconventional OD addresses these challenges through different logics. For instance, instead of formal hierarchies, decision-making is distributed through expertise-based circles (adaptive governance); rather than top-down monitoring, alignment is achieved through peer accountability and open information flows (ample transparency). The contribution lies not in proposing an alternative ideal type but in articulating the micro-foundations of unconventional OD as a dynamic, adaptive system.

Furthermore, this study advances theoretical understanding by highlighting the interdependencies among these components. It suggests that the success of unconventional OD does not depend on the presence of isolated practices but on their systemic integration, which is echoed in complexity theory and the literature on organizational ambidexterity (O Reilly and Tushman, 2013). By framing OD as a dynamic relational system of design choices and trade-offs, this research offers a more nuanced lens through which to understand organizational adaptability in volatile environments.

(ii) **Empirically**, this thesis contributes to a rich, context-sensitive understanding of how unconventional OD is enacted in practice. Through an in-depth qualitative analysis of five Spanish SMEs that had adopted non-hierarchical forms prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the study provides detailed evidence of how these firms structured authority, shared information, managed workflows, and embedded innovation and purpose into their daily routines.

This contribution is particularly significant given the scarcity of empirical work on OD that goes beyond theoretical or prescriptive accounts (Baumann et al., 2024; Ambos and Tatarinov,

2023). By employing an inductive, multi-case approach grounded in the Gioia methodology (Gioia et al., 2013), this research elucidates the lived experience of employees and leaders in unconventional organizations. It provides granular insight into the affordances and limitations of design features such as peer-based governance, open financial reporting, rotating roles, and ritualized synchronization practices.

Moreover, this empirical work helps bridge the gap between normative prescriptions (e.g. "flatten the hierarchy," "embrace self-management") and their operationalization in everyday organizational life. It documents how trade-offs are experienced and managed on the ground, and how design choices evolve over time through iterative adaptation, a contribution that aligns with recent calls for more process-oriented research in organization theory (Langley and Tsoukas, 2017).

(iii) From a **managerial perspective**, this research offers a structured yet flexible framework for rethinking OD in contemporary firms. The six dimensions identified can serve as diagnostic lenses for practitioners seeking to assess their current organizational setup and explore targeted interventions to enhance autonomy, agility, and resilience.

Rather than proposing a wholesale adoption of a specific model (e.g., holacracy), the study supports a modular and incremental approach to design innovation. For example, organizations may begin by piloting ample transparency through open budgeting or experimenting with peer-based decision-making in project teams. Over time, they can assess interdependencies and scale practices that show alignment with their strategic objectives and cultural readiness (Van Bree and Gonzalez, 2025). This approach is consistent with the notion of "safe-to-try" experiments in agile organizations (Denning, 2018) and reflects the insight that OD transformation is not a binary shift but a continuous process of learning, feedback, and redesign.

The framework also helps organizations anticipate and mitigate potential trade-offs. By understanding that autonomy without alignment can lead to drift, or that transparency without interpretive support can cause confusion or anxiety, leaders can design balancing mechanisms, such as synchronization rituals, peer reviews, or curated dashboards, to support effective implementation. These insights are particularly relevant for SMEs or scale-ups navigating the transition from founder-centric governance to more participatory, distributed models.

In sum, the practical contribution of this research lies in its capacity to inform both diagnostic assessment and design experimentation, enabling organizations to navigate complexity with greater coherence, adaptability, and purpose.

Limitations

This study presents several limitations that inform both the interpretation of findings and the scope for future research. First, the research adopts a qualitative, multi-case study design focused on five Spanish SMEs. While this approach enabled rich, context-sensitive insights, it also entails limitations in terms of generalizability. The firms analyzed were relatively modular in structure and operated in sectors and contexts that supported trust-based autonomy and design experimentation. As such, the transferability of these findings to other settings, particularly large corporations or highly regulated environments, should be treated with caution.

Indeed, organizational size, industry, and national context may constrain the applicability of unconventional design practices. Larger organizations, for instance, may face structural and normative barriers to implementing extensive self-management or transparency (Hofstede 1980). Legal reporting requirements, institutional complexity, and internal politics may require formal bridging mechanisms, more hierarchical coordination, or incremental changes to support adaptation. Nevertheless, certain principles, such as participatory governance or openness, could still be selectively applied, provided there is cultural readiness and adequate technological infrastructure. The scalability of these design elements likely depends on the maturity of organizational processes and the ability to sequence reforms in a context-sensitive manner.

Moreover, the study focused exclusively on firms that had successfully adopted unconventional OD practices, introducing a potential survivor bias. The absence of cases where such models failed or were reversed may result in an overly optimistic view of their viability. Future research would benefit from incorporating cases of failure or rollback to better understand the limits and failure points of these designs, including the conditions under which organizations revert to more traditional templates.

Another limitation concerns the temporal scope of the research. While the abductive design and inclusion of follow-up interviews offered opportunities to revisit emergent dynamics, the study nonetheless captures a snapshot at a certain point in time. A longitudinal perspective

could shed further light on how these design components evolve under changing conditions, including growth, crisis, or shifts in leadership. Although no major structural transformations occurred during the research period, some organizations introduced incremental changes, which were examined to test the robustness of the findings. These changes revealed that the identified components are not static artifacts but dynamic configurations that adapt over time.

In this sense, the thesis does not aim to produce a fixed taxonomy of unconventional OD. Rather, it offers an analytically grounded snapshot of how these configurations took shape and interacted during the research process, while acknowledging their capacity for continued evolution. The inherent fluidity of OD underscores the value of the longitudinal and abductive elements embedded in the research design, which allowed for iterative theorizing and greater contextual sensitivity.

Finally, while the COVID-19 pandemic did not emerge as a central variable in the data, its indirect influence cannot be fully ruled out. All firms had adopted their unconventional practices prior to the crisis and reported no substantial changes due to it. Still, it is plausible that the pandemic accelerated or reinforced certain dynamics already underway, such as digital collaboration or distributed decision-making. Future research might examine how systemic shocks enable, challenge, or reshape the viability of such design choices.

Taken together, these limitations do not diminish the value of the findings but highlight the importance of contextual sensitivity, temporal depth, and theoretical openness in advancing our understanding of unconventional OD. They also point to promising avenues for further exploration, particularly regarding how these design elements scale, evolve, or adapt across different organizational contexts.

Future avenues for research

Building on the conceptual contributions and empirical insights of this study, several promising avenues for future research emerge. These directions aim to deepen understanding of unconventional OD, extend its empirical grounding, and explore its dynamic interaction with broader institutional and technological contexts.

(i) **Longitudinal investigations of design evolution**. One important trajectory involves examining how unconventional OD configurations evolve over time. While this study captures a snapshot of established practices, future research could adopt a longitudinal design to explore how these organizations adapt their structures and coordination

mechanisms in response to leadership transitions, environmental turbulence, or strategic reorientation. Such studies would offer valuable insights into the temporal resilience, path dependence, or transformation of unconventional design logics.

(ii) **Cross-sectoral and cross-national comparisons**. Another productive line of inquiry concerns the comparative analysis of unconventional OD across industries and cultural contexts. Given that the present research focuses on Spanish SMEs operating in relatively open sectors, future studies could explore how similar design principles are enacted in more institutionally constrained environments, such as heavily regulated industries (e.g., healthcare, banking) or in national settings with different cultural expectations around hierarchy, authority, and risk (Hofstede, 1980; House et al., 2004). Comparative case studies may illuminate how contextual affordances and constraints shape the translation and adaptation of unconventional OD principles.

(iii) **Scaling unconventional OD in larger organizational settings**. The question of scalability remains largely underexplored. While SMEs provide fertile ground for experimentation with alternative design features, it remains unclear how such models can be extended to larger, more complex organizations without diluting their underlying logics. Future research could investigate hybrid approaches within multinational corporations (e.g., autonomous teams or experimental units embedded in hierarchical systems) and assess the tensions, compromises, and design adaptations required to maintain coherence and efficiency at scale.

(iv) **Digital technologies and OD transformation**. The increasing penetration of digital platforms, automation tools, and artificial intelligence presents both opportunities and constraints for unconventional OD. On the one hand, digital infrastructures may enable more decentralized decision-making, real-time coordination, and transparent information flows; on the other, they may introduce new forms of control, surveillance, or data-driven standardization. Future research could explore how digitalization interacts with design principles such as autonomy, transparency, and distributed governance, and whether it reinforces or erodes the emancipatory potential of unconventional OD (Zuboff, 2019; Faraj et al., 2018).

(v) **OD and cultural transformation**. Finally, further research is needed on the cultural foundations and implications of adopting unconventional OD. While this study has shown that structural elements such as ample transparency or collaborative workflows require specific cultural enablers (such as psychological safety or a shared sense of purpose) the processes through which such cultural conditions are cultivated remain

insufficiently understood. Future work could explore the interplay between cultural transformation and design experimentation, including the role of leadership, rituals, narrative practices, and learning routines in supporting transitions from traditional to unconventional organizational forms.

Taken together, these research directions call for an expanded and interdisciplinary agenda that attends not only to the structural and functional aspects of OD, but also to its temporal, cultural, technological, and institutional embeddedness.

Researcher's learning and development journey

Finally, it is also important to acknowledge my own research journey and competence as an evolving outcome, which has enriched me professionally and personally over the past few years. This doctoral project represents the culmination of a learning journey during which methodological expertise in qualitative inquiry, case study logic, and inductive theorizing was progressively developed. As Edmondson and McManus (2007) argue, methodological fit must be accompanied by technical adequacy, the capacity to apply, adapt, and refine research tools across the different stages of the inquiry process.

To ensure such adequacy and rigor, I undertook a sustained and multi-dimensional program of academic training, scholarly engagement, and methodological refinement. Throughout the doctoral program, I participated in more than ten research seminars and colloquia not only at Universidad Pontificia Comillas, but also in collaboration with other academic institutions, where I regularly presented thesis progress and acted as discussant for other doctoral candidates. These sessions were instrumental in enhancing my analytical precision, theoretical reflexivity, and capacity for peer review.

In parallel, I completed a range of structured training activities designed to strengthen technical and conceptual skills in organizational research. These included seminars on Academic Writing, Critical Thinking, Ethics in Research, and Scientific Publishing, among others. Particularly relevant to this study was my participation in the Workshop on Theorizing from Qualitative Data, which offered advanced training in inductive theory-building aligned with the Gioia methodology employed in this dissertation.

During the early phases of the doctoral process, I submitted a preliminary paper to a workshop organized by the European Group for Organizational Studies (EGOS). Although the manuscript was still underdeveloped, the feedback I received from international scholars

proved formative in identifying early limitations in framing and method, which I subsequently addressed and integrated into more mature stages of the research. Later on, I also presented a working paper at the European Academy of Management (EURAM) conference, where I engaged in peer feedback sessions and received input from established academics in the field of organization theory.

Beyond formal training and conferences, I became an active member of several academic communities and professional networks, including EGOS, EURAM, and other scholarly forums related to organization studies and OD. These affiliations provided ongoing exposure to emerging research debates and allowed me to contrast analytical perspectives, clarify methodological choices, and obtain valuable references and orientations throughout the development of the thesis.

In addition, drawing from this ongoing expanded research experience, I participated in the PhD Mentoring Program coordinated by Universidad Pontificia Comillas, where I supported junior doctoral students in the design and execution of their research projects at early stages. This experience further reinforced my ability to engage in reflective methodological dialogue and provided opportunities to exercise critical thinking beyond my own study. I also completed a formal Peer-review training program offered by the university, which involved the critical evaluation of multiple research manuscripts and enhanced my sensitivity to academic rigor and coherence.

Taken together, these experiences, combining structured training, scholarly exchange, and professional community engagement, have shaped my competence as a qualitative researcher and strengthened the overall robustness of this dissertation. By integrating external feedback, peer collaboration, and continuous methodological refinement, I was able to navigate the complexities of qualitative fieldwork and produce a technically rigorous and theoretically grounded contribution to the study of OD.

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Appendix: Interview guide and rationale

*Overview and purpose of the interviews: t*he interviews were conducted as part of a qualitative, multiple-case study aiming to understand the OD choices of firms that both self-identified and were externally recognized as "unconventional." The goal was to explore how individuals made sense of organizational practices, routines, and structures in their everyday work without presupposing predefined theoretical categories.

Each semi-structured interview lasted approximately 50 minutes on average, though some extended beyond two hours. The focus was on eliciting participants' lived experiences and perceptions of how their organization operates in practice.

*Interview design: th*e interview protocol followed a semi-structured design built around a set of open-ended questions and thematic prompts. These were organized into broad domains (e.g., career trajectory, typical day, decision-making, culture), but were not presented to participants as such. Conversations followed a fluid, participant-led narrative, with the interviewer adapting the sequence and phrasing of questions according to each respondent's role, seniority, and responses.

The structure allowed for spontaneous elaboration, enabling participants to introduce and develop themes that were meaningful to them. Where needed, the interviewer used follow-up prompts (e.g., "Could you give an example?" or "Did you experience this directly?") to encourage deeper reflection or clarify abstract statements.

*Mitigating priming and theoretical bias: t*o minimize the risk of priming the interview design rested on two principles. First, participants were initially asked to describe their day-to-day work and organizational experiences in their own terms. Concepts such as "self-management," "teal," or "holacracy" were never introduced upfront. Second, when these terms did arise (whether spontaneously or in the later stages of the interview), the interviewer invited participants to define them in their own words and reflect on whether such labels resonated with their actual practices.

This sequencing ensured that even participants familiar with OD models had already offered unprompted accounts of their organizational reality, supporting more authentic interpretation and reducing the influence of confirmatory framing.

*Use of supporting documentation: p*rior to each interview, the researcher compiled a dossier of publicly available materials tailored to the company and the participant's role (e.g., press articles, social media content, employee testimonials). These served primarily as contextual preparation for the interviewer. References to such materials during the interview were minimal and only used when relevant to clarify or expand on something already raised by the participant. In some cases, participants were invited to comment on a recent media piece describing their organization's way of working.

*Consent and ethical considerations: a*t the outset of each interview, participants were reminded of the study's academic purpose and assured that all data would be anonymized. They were explicitly asked for consent to record the conversation. In instances where recording was not feasible due to participant preference or technical issues, detailed notes were taken. When applicable, the interviewer referred to earlier exchanges (email or phone) to re-establish rapport and confirm the participant's willingness to engage openly.

Protocol: Interview introduction and consent

At the outset of each interview, the researcher briefly restated the aims and confidentiality parameters of the study. Participants were reminded that their insights would be used only for academic purposes, and any identifying details would be anonymized.

*Recording consent: p*articipants were asked for permission to record the conversation. In cases where formal recording was not feasible (e.g., technological constraints, participant preference), detailed notes were taken.

*Reference to previous contact: w*herever applicable, the researcher referred to a prior conversation or email exchange that had explained the study's broader objectives. This step helped build rapport and reconfirm the participant's willingness to speak freely.

Interview guide: verbatim questions

The questions listed in Table A-1 reflect the actual wording used during the interviews. Although the questions are grouped thematically in this appendix for clarity, during the interviews these categories were not made explicit to participants. Instead, the conversations followed a fluid, participant-led narrative, with the interviewer drawing on the guide to ensure consistent coverage of relevant topics while allowing for emergent insights and natural storytelling.

For each interview, a dossier was prepared with available company information (press articles, published books, social media posts, or any available supporting information).

Table A-1. Interview questions grouped by topic area

Topic	*Interview questions*
Company trajectory and role	Could you briefly share the trajectory of [company] from an organizational perspective, considering your role as [interviewee's role]?
	Can you tell me about your career path here?
	How long have you been with the company, and how have you seen it evolve organizationally?
	I've been told [company] is quite different; why do you think that is?
Personal experience	How would you describe your experience as a member of the [company] team?
	What has your personal experience been like from an organizational perspective?
	How would you describe the work environment?
	Do you feel the company cares about people's wellbeing? In what ways?
	Could you give an example of what you mean?
	Thank you for sharing that. Was that something you personally experienced, witnessed, or heard about from someone else?
Typical workday	What does a typical workday look like for you?
	How do you usually begin your day?
	Are there any regular ceremonies or rituals?
	Do you usually arrive at the same time?
	Do you report to someone (and if so, to whom)?
	What types of internal meetings or dynamics are part of your day-to-day work?
	Can you give me an example of what that looks like in practice?
Organizational principles and evolution	What organizational principles would you say are applied at [company]?
	What principles, rituals, dynamics, or events would you say define the organization?
	What values are reinforced across the company?
	Are there rituals or shared practices that shape the organizational identity?

Topic	*Interview questions*
	How have these concepts, practices, or structures evolved over the years?
	Can you think of a concrete situation that illustrates that?
	Based on your experience at [company], how do you understand decision-making processes?
	And what about recognition of work?
	What is your role in decision-making processes?
	Could you share a recent example of a decision you were involved in and how it was made?
	Do you feel free to organize your time and tasks?
	Do you feel you can choose which projects to get involved in?
	Are roles clearly defined? How are responsibilities distributed?
	How does information flow within the company?
	Who has access to financial, strategic, or business-related information?
	How are tasks distributed or divided among the team?
	How is knowledge or information managed?
	What happens when someone proposes something different?
	Can people experiment or test new ideas?
	How is learning promoted within the organization?
	What happens when someone makes a mistake?
	Do you have an example of when this happened? Did you see it yourself or was it shared with you?
	I came across an [article/interview/podcast] published on [date] that discusses [company] and its distinctive way of organizing. Are you familiar with it?
	Could you share your perspective on what it says?
	How do you understand theories about [self-management, teal organizations, or the adoption of methodologies like holacracy]?
Points of misalignment	Is there anything that does not quite fit or that feels incongruous within [company]?
	Could you share any situations that seemed unusual or challenging?
	How are conflicts handled in this company?
	Can you give an example of a conflict you have experienced?
	That example...was it something you personally went through, or something you heard about from someone else?

Topic	*Interview questions*
Final reflections	Is there anything else you would like to add that we haven't discussed?
	Is there anything that, in your view, simply wouldn't be acceptable in this company?
	Can you give an example of a practice that would be unthinkable here?

Source: own elaboration