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Career Success vs. Ethical Integrity: The Role of Peer Influence

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Abstract

In today's fast-paced and competitive job market, young employees often face situations that challenge their sense of being right and wrong. In many of these moments, official corporate policies or written rules may not offer clear guidelines. Therefore, colleagues' behaviour can serve as a reference point and shape perceptions of what is acceptable. Understanding how peer influence operates in an organisational setting is crucial for supporting responsible behaviour and healthy career growth for young professionals. This Master's thesis examines how coworkers, team dynamics, and informal norms influence young professionals' reactions and responses to everyday ethical challenges. The analysis was based on Hirschman's (1970) Exit, Voice, and Loyalty framework and Granovetter's (1978) Threshold Theory. The present study illustrates that peer behaviour can gradually shift personal red lines, making everyday ethical breaches seem normal. Our findings also show that social dynamics within a team can play a dual role: while some professional environments can normalize unethical practices, supportive teams with open communication can, in contrast, encourage individuals to act in line with their moral values. Finally, the decision to leave the company appears independent of peer influence and was mainly driven by poor leadership or a misfit with personal goals, rather than by peer pressure. This research identifies areas for future study on peer influence and ethical climate in corporate settings. It also discusses practical implications for HR and management. Overall, our work underscores the importance of cultivating corporate culture and environments that use social influence to support integrity rather than contribute to ethical decline in organisations.

Keywords: Peer Influence, Ethical Decision-Making, Workplace Ethics, Corporate Ethics, Exit–Voice–Loyalty, Threshold Theory, Organisational Loyalty, Early-Career Employees

Zusammenfassung

Im heutigen schnelllebigen Arbeitsmarkt stehen junge Leute oft vor Situationen, die ihr Gefühl für Richtig und Falsch herausfordern. In vielen solchen Momenten bieten formelle Unternehmensrichtlinien oder Regeln keine klaren Leitlinien. Das Verhalten von Kollegen kann daher als Referenzpunkt dienen und das Verständnis dafür prägen, was als akzeptabel gilt. Das Verständnis dafür, wie Peer-Einfluss in organisationalen Kontexten wirkt, ist entscheidend, um verantwortungsvolles Verhalten und gesundes Karrierewachstum junger Menschen zu fördern. Diese Masterarbeit untersucht, wie Kollegen, Teamdynamiken und informelle Normen das Verhalten junger Berufstätiger gegenüber alltäglichen ethischen Herausforderungen beeinflussen. Die Analyse basiert auf Hirschmans (1970) Exit-, Voice- und Loyalty-Modell sowie auf Granovetters (1978) Schwellentheorie. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass das Verhalten von Kollegen persönliche „rote Linien“ verschieben und dadurch alltägliche ethische Verstöße als normal erscheinen lassen kann. Gleichzeitig kann die Teamdynamik eine doppelte Rolle spielen: Während manche Arbeitsumgebungen unethische Praktiken normalisieren, können unterstützende Teams durch offene Kommunikation dazu beitragen, dass sich Individuen an ihren moralischen Werten orientieren. Die Entscheidung, das Unternehmen zu verlassen, scheint weitgehend vom Peer-Einfluss unabhängig zu sein und wird vor allem von schlechtem Management oder einer Unvereinbarkeit mit persönlichen Zielen bestimmt, jedoch nicht von Peer-Druck. Die Studie identifiziert Bereiche für zukünftige Forschung zum Einfluss von Kollegen sowie zum ethischen Klima in Unternehmen und skizziert praktische Implikationen für die Personalabteilung und das Management. Insgesamt unterstreicht diese Masterarbeit die Bedeutung einer Unternehmenskultur, die soziale Einflüsse nutzt, um Integrität zu fördern und nicht zum ethischen Niedergang beizutragen.

Schlüsselwörter: Peer-Einfluss, Ethische Entscheidungen, Arbeitsmoral, Unternehmensethik, Exit–Voice–Loyalty, Schwellentheorie, Organisationsloyalität, Berufseinsteiger

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Man is only a moral being because he lives in society, since morality consists in solidarity with the group, and varies according to that solidarity. Cause all social life to vanish, and moral life would vanish at the same time, having no object to cling to.

Émile Durkheim

1. Introduction

The discussion of morality and ethics has been ongoing for thousands of years, beginning with the early teachings of ancient Greek philosophy. However, even today, researchers in various fields are still trying to understand how people make moral choices and what effects those choices have. Despite some ambiguity surrounding the concept of ethical decision-making, in this study, an ethical choice will refer to a situation in which an individual should make a decision or judgment with clear implications (Moore & Tenbrunsel, 2014, p.140).

In today's exceptionally competitive and dynamic work environment (Zhang, Y., Li, X., & Huang, L., 2023, p.2328), young professionals who are starting their careers often face situations in which personal values may conflict with organisational expectations, social pressure, or ambition, transforming ethical decision-making into a complex challenge. One of the most pressing issues is how people respond to ethically ambiguous situations, especially when others normalize or justify questionable decisions (Greenberg et al., 2007, p.25).

Granovetter (1985) argued that this conflict is not an individual psychological issue but rather has a sociological nature, arising from and shaped by the social and institutional structures in which young professionals are embedded:

Actors do not behave or decide as atoms outside a social context,
nor do they adhere slavishly to a script written for them by the particular
intersection of social categories that they happen to occupy.

Their Attempts at purposive action are instead embedded in concrete, ongoing
systems of social relations. (Granovetter, 1985, p. 487)

Thus, we can argue that organisational culture, industry expectations, and peer networks all play vital roles in either reinforcing or challenging individual convictions.

Today's labor market is marked by project-based contracts (Kalleberg & Vallas, 2018, p.10), flattened hierarchies, and perpetual performance rankings (Chan, 2022, p.3), which might place young professionals in a position where they must juggle personal values and ideas with subtle (and often not so subtle) cues from colleagues, supervisors, and society.

While they have enough autonomy to make their own choices, they are heavily dependent on others' evaluations, especially those of people aiming for career advancement. Thus, ethical dilemmas often arise when boosting one's own prospects seems to clash with fairness or transparency.

Scholars have increasingly recognized that organisational life is shaped not only by formal rules but especially by the implicit norms and cultures that govern everyday behaviour. Social networks facilitate not just the spread of information and opportunities (Granovetter, 1973), but also the diffusion of shared norms that influence conduct within organisations (Treviño, Weaver, & Reynolds, 2006). The interactive environment comprising coworker judgments, mentor role modeling, and group standards is crucial for understanding how ethical behaviours are learned and reinforced.

“If most adults’ thinking about right and wrong is highly susceptible to external influence, then the management of such conduct through attention to norms, peer behavior, leadership, reward systems, climate, culture, and so on becomes important” (Treviño, Weaver, & Reynolds, 2006, p. 955).

1.2 Research Question and Main Objectives

This study aims to examine how peers and the overall organisational environment can influence the ethical career decisions of young professionals, especially in those situations that require compromises. Rather than viewing ethics as a product of isolated personal characteristics, this research situates ethical choices within the context of professional interactions, status hierarchies, and shared norms that define contemporary organisational life (Greenberg, Ashton-James, & Ashkanasy, 2007).

“Our reaction is predicated on the observation that social comparison appears to be embedded deeply into the fabric of organizational life” (Greenberg, Ashton-James, & Ashkanasy, 2007, p. 23).

The significance of this study for business sociology derives from its role in highlighting how collective processes influence individual (ethical or unethical) behaviour in organisations. As was outlined before, workplaces are becoming increasingly competitive and complex. Thus, understanding the mechanisms through which group dynamics or company culture affect ethical standards is vital for sustaining organisational legitimacy and even public trust (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998, pp. 244–245).

The research question of this study, therefore, is:

How does peer influence shape the moral decisions of young professionals in workplace dilemmas?

Our focus is on morally complex situations, especially those moments in our workspace when boosting one’s prospects seems to clash with fairness or transparency. Rather than treating ethics as a purely psychological trait, we locate it within the social networks, informal norms, and status hierarchies that structure contemporary workplaces.

Understanding these processes is valuable on three fronts:

- First, it deepens economic-sociological debates about how local interaction orders influence macro-level outcomes such as organisational reputation and industry standards.
- Second, it offers HR professionals evidence on when peer dynamics support or corrode integrity initiatives.
- Third, it can prepare career entrants to recognize social pressures better and develop strategies for maintaining agency in ethically ambiguous settings.

By addressing these objectives, the thesis aims to enrich business sociology and provide a foundation for fostering ethical cultures in modern organisations.

In this study, a qualitative design will be used, allowing participants to narrate concrete episodes, such as accepting or rejecting promotions, handling data irregularities, responding to client pressure, and reflecting on the peer signals that could influence them. The findings aim to contribute to scholars of organisational sociology and to managers seeking to align ethical aspirations with everyday incentive structures.

2. Literature Review

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the relevant scholarly research on ethical decision-making among young professionals within organisational contexts. Particular attention will be paid to how social and institutional influences might shape moral choices in realistic career-related dilemmas.

In this literature review, we will focus primarily on interdisciplinary studies that connect fields such as business sociology, organisational behaviour, and related social sciences to deepen our understanding of the mechanisms by which peer influence and organisational environments affect individual ethical decision-making. It is essential to mention that while existing research has addressed various aspects of workplace and business ethics, this literature review will concentrate specifically on the social processes and collective dynamics that influence moral judgment and decision-making among early-career professionals. The analysis begins with a broad examination of how group norms and peer interactions shape individual behaviour in organisational settings, then narrows to the specific mechanisms by which ethical boundaries are established and maintained.

2.1 Peer Influence, Social Norms, and Organisational Context in Ethical Decisions

In contrast to psychology, a central perspective in business sociology holds that ethical and unethical behaviour among employees is primarily shaped by the surrounding social and organisational environment, rather than by individual moral reasoning alone (Osman et al., 2025, p. 28). In other words, it is a complex process that goes beyond individuals' personal characteristics.

This perspective is supported by extensive empirical research demonstrating that workplace behaviour, evaluations, and even the vision of justice are shaped more by informal norms, peer expectations, and collective reference points than by personal moral reflection and views (Greenberg, Ashton-James, & Ashkanasy, 2007, p. 23).

The initial proposition is that ethical standards can emerge, shift, and be enforced through routine interactions of coworkers, making organisational contexts crucial for understanding moral decision-making in career-related dilemmas.

When a person is asked to form an opinion privately and then has made available to him the consensus of opinion in the group of which he is a member, those who discover that most others in the group disagree with them become relatively less confident that their opinion is correct and a goodly proportion change their opinion. Those who discover that most others in the group agree with them become highly confident in their opinion, and it is extremely rare to find one of them changing his opinion. (Festinger, 1954, p. 118)

Contemporary research, as mentioned above, has expanded this understanding by demonstrating how peer interactions and social feedback align to justify unacceptable practices across various organisational contexts.

Another recent empirical work provides compelling evidence for these mechanisms. For example, in the study of early-career accountants, McManus and Subramaniam (2009) observed that “peers have a strong effect on the ethical evaluations of accountants who are still early in their career, particularly in terms of their perceptions of the seriousness of a hypothetical ethical conflict and also the extent to which they judge an unethical act by their superiors to be unethical” (p.638).

A more recent study by Alvarez, Zurita, and Carvallo (2023) showed that students' tendency to adjust their ethical evaluations increased noticeably after group discussions with their peers. As much as 40 % of participants had tendencies to adapt their answers regarding ethical dilemmas, according to the majority of their peers. These results highlight the influence of peers or group opinion on moral judgments, especially in circumstances where it is obligatory

to choose among several ethically ambiguous alternatives (p. 38). The impact of peer influence goes beyond mere conformity; it produces a threshold effect, in which the behaviour of a critical mass can trigger broader organisational shifts. In other words, this process illustrates how behaviours spread when enough people start doing something first, which then influences others to follow, creating a wave of participation across the whole group (Granovetter, 1978).

We argue that this threshold phenomenon can be particularly evident in competitive or insecure environments where early-career professionals are seeking advancement, acknowledgment, and social belonging, making this group especially sensitive to group acceptance, moral modeling, and informal sanctions or consequences for disagreeing with the majority.

Expanding on these findings, contemporary organisational research has shown that peer influence operates through multiple interconnected mechanisms. The impact of high-status individuals and opinion leaders within peer groups has been documented as particularly powerful.

Research by Choukas-Bradley et al. (2015) found that participants who observe pro-social norms from high-status peers also tend to express a willingness to engage in prosocial behaviour, such as volunteering (p. 15). What is of particular interest is that this influence remained even when participants believed that their actions and responses were no longer being monitored or observed by others. This aspect might indicate the considerable impact of group norms on moral viewpoints. This dynamic might be especially pronounced in workplace contexts where status hierarchies and career advancement opportunities make peer relationships particularly salient.

Understanding the organisational context is vital for understanding how ethical decisions are made and how moral standards are maintained in business settings.

Recent research in business sociology has identified three main components that shape the ethical context of organisations (Kaptein, 2011, pp. 843-847). To clarify how these elements interact, we first need to define each component: culture is defined as “those aspects of the perceived organisational context that may impede unethical behaviour and encourage ethical behaviour,” and ethical climate is defined as “the perceptions of managers and employees about what constitutes unethical and ethical behaviour in the organisation.” An ethics program belongs to the formal context of an organisation and “consists of instruments and measures like

codes of ethics, training sessions, whistle-blowing policies, and monitoring systems” (as cited in Kaptein, 2011, p. 846).

These components enable us to understand how an organisation’s ethical culture relates to the misconduct of its managers and employees.

Figure 1



Figure 1: Key components of the organisational context explaining unethical behaviour of managers and employees

Note. Reproduced from Kaptein, 2011, p. 845

Kaptein’s (2011) study surveyed 341 manager-subordinate groups and compared three aspects of an organisation’s ethical setup (as illustrated in Figure 1): informal norms (ethical culture), shared expectations (ethical climate), and formal rules (ethics programs). Interestingly, it was found that the practical day-to-day processes, for example, leaders and supervisors setting a good example (being a role model), having clear support for doing the “right thing”, encouraging open discussion of ethical issues and moral dilemmas, and rewarding integrity, were the strongest factors in reducing ethical misconduct. In contrast, having an ethics program or written rules had almost no influence once those everyday cultural practices were in place.

In the next section, we will continue to build on the premise that erosion of ethical standards often occurs through subtle, not apparent shifts in shared norms and daily practices. To gain a more nuanced overview of how broader organisational structures and networks shape such dynamics, we will explore how an organisation's formal and informal culture (leadership behaviours, communication patterns, and social ties) might influence the spread or containment of ethical (and unethical) practices. By analyzing the interplay among network positions, peer-group pressures, and institutional expectations, this section will illuminate the systemic forces that govern moral decision-making in professional settings.

2.2 Organisational Culture, Networks, and Systemic Influences on Ethical Decisions

When discussing how peer comparison or threshold effects might shape group behaviour, we shall not forget that organisational culture and structure can set the broader context for ethical behaviour.

The role of leadership in creating and maintaining ethical organisational climates cannot be underestimated. Previous research has demonstrated that ethical leadership flows outward from senior management in large organisations. Leaders set the tone and common direction for how moral standards are interpreted and enforced throughout the hierarchy. When they demonstrate ethical behaviour and consistently reinforce moral expectations among their employees, they create conditions in which peer influence operates to support rather than undermine ethical conduct (Mayer et al., 2009; Treviño, Weaver, & Reynolds, 2006).

Beyond individual leaders, the concept of ethical climate captures employees' shared perceptions of which behaviours are sanctioned or rewarded within their workplace. As Bart and Cullen (1988) explain, "the prevailing perceptions of typical organizational practices and procedures that have ethical content constitute the ethical work climate" (p. 102).

A strong ethical climate, characterized by transparent decision-making, fair treatment, and consistent enforcement of moral standards, serves as a powerful buffer against the (subtle) normalization of questionable practices that often arises through repeated peer justifications (Kaptein, 2011, pp. 14-16). Conversely, in workplaces where rules aren't applied fairly or where success is valued above all else, people quickly start bending moral rules and repeating questionable actions.

Network analysis makes the understanding process of organisational influences on ethical behaviour more complex. In the context of this study, the structure of social networks within organisations means their density and centralization might significantly affect how norms are transmitted and enforced.

Krackhardt's (1992) research on "the strength of strong ties" has demonstrated that employees embedded in dense, cohesive, and trusting networks experience strong convergence of group norms. "Strong ties constitute a base of trust that can reduce resistance and provide comfort in the face of uncertainty. Thus, it will be argued that change is not facilitated by weak ties, but rather by a particular type of strong tie" (Krackhardt, 1992, p. 217).

Thus, we can assume that individuals in such tight-knit groups might tend to share and enforce the same informal rules, which strengthens shared expectations for behaviour, and this includes ethical norms or justification of unethical actions.

In contrast, those who occupy structural "bridges" or peripheral positions may be exposed to conflicting expectations or enjoy greater autonomy from dominant norms. This network positioning affects not only individuals' exposure to ethical or unethical influences but also their capacity to resist or challenge unethical behaviour (Krackhardt, 1992, p. 225).

Barker (1993), in his famous concept of "*concertive control*," which he defines as "In a sense, concertive control reflects the adoption of a new substantive rationality, a new set of consensual values, by the organization and its members" (p. 411), illustrates how networks of peers can create powerful informal sets of rules. Members of self-managing groups collectively develop and negotiate shared values and rules within their teams (Baker, 1933).

This process shifts control from written rules or supervisors to peers, creating a self-imposed system of norms and values. These informal control mechanisms might operate through various social instruments, such as gossip or reputation, that control boundaries of acceptable conduct. The power of these mechanisms depends on the underlying values and norms that guide peer judgment or enforcement. This process aligns closely with the study's focus on peer influence and tolerance in ethical decision-making among young professionals, illustrating how collective peer dynamics operate to maintain or erode workplace morality.

Another recent research has identified organisational moral disengagement as a particularly problematic form of systemic influence on ethical behaviour. Fida and Skovgaard-Smith

(2024) introduce the concept of *organisational moral disengagement* (OrgMD) and describe it as a collective mindset that goes way beyond attitudes or views of an individual, but represents a shared perception within organisations that can justify or condone questionable and unethical behaviours for the perceived benefit of the organisation (p.961).

This process arises from social interactions among members who collectively suspend moral standards, thereby enabling unethical practices to flourish. The research demonstrates that organisational moral disengagement can influence employees' likelihood of participating in or staying silent about unethical practices.

“We show that when members perceive their organisation to be morally disengaged, they are more likely to engage in unethical pro-organisational behaviour and silence” (Fida and Skovgaard-Smith 2024, p.960).

This systemic suspension of morality highlights how organisational culture and social dynamics can influence and normalize unethical actions, which is of particular interest in this study as we focus on how peer justifications and organisational tolerance shape ethical compromises among early-career professionals.

When speaking about macro-processes, institutional and organisational pressures represent another vital perspective of influence on ethical behaviour. DiMaggio and Powell's (1983) concept of *institutional isomorphism* explains how organisations tend to mimic practices, including ethical standards and the overall perception of professionals as fitting within their field (pp. 153-157). This isomorphic pressure can propagate both ethical best practices and questionable behaviours across not only organisations, but also industries. When industry norms tolerate or even reward certain forms of moral compromise, individual organisations may find it difficult to maintain higher standards (pp.153-155). Building further on this understanding, perceptions of organisational fairness play a crucial role in how young professionals might navigate ethical challenges at work.

Based on the findings discussed in this chapter, we can argue that organisational culture, management style, and social dynamics collectively influence the ethical boundaries of professionals within these organisations. We also discussed how ethical norms are formed, maintained, or challenged, highlighting the complex interplay among moral views, ethical boundaries, and the organisational context.

The following section aims to investigate the processes by which ethical norms become normalized, the process of resistance to unethical pressures, and strategies individuals and organisations use to respond, offering another critical perspective for further addressing the core of this research.

2.3 Normalization Processes, Resistance, and Response Strategies

As discussed above, the normalization of unethical behaviour is a complex social process that operates through multiple interdependent mechanisms. While peer influence and organisational climate create conditions for ethical compromise, the normalization of deviant behaviour involves gradual shifts in collective perceptions of what is considered moral conduct. This process can be easily overlooked because it happens gradually, with small, seemingly harmless choices. But over time, these little and at first sight harmless compromises add up. At this moment, the actions that once felt wrong or immoral can start to feel normal in the workplace.

In this chapter, the discussion will focus on patterns within workplace cultures that can gradually weaken ethical boundaries and personal moral standards in a professional context. Special attention will be given to the phenomenon in which ethical considerations become less visible or less critical in decision-making regarding moral dilemmas.

Of particular interest are those cases involving repeated exposure and group validation. The explanations provided in this chapter shed light on how peer rationalizations and group dynamics can normalize actions that might once have been seen as unacceptable, turning isolated compromises into common practice across an organisation.

Research in sociology has shown that observing unethical behaviour among peers can lead to similar misconduct through coworker influence within close-knit working groups (for example, colleagues in one department). Pascual-Ezama, Banon, and Feldman Hall (2015) find that employees embedded in familiar peer groups are more likely to engage in unethical behaviours, as shifting social norms within these groups can justify and normalize misconduct.

“Work pressure given by rewards (social or economic) and others’ honest/dishonest behaviour can significantly modify individual behaviour” (Pascual-Ezama, Banon, and Feldman Hall, 2015, p. 11).

The desire to maintain reputation or to have a certain standing within a trusted peer group can decrease the probability of cheating, "...for example, when you are aware of the presence of other colleagues cheating" (Pascual-Ezama, Banon, and Feldman Hall, 2015, p. 12). However, it is strongly dependent on the perceived consequences of such actions. Such a dynamic illustrates how peer behaviour not only can shape an individual's ethical choices but also contributes to the broader erosion of workplace morality. Thus, we can argue that focusing on peer dynamics and organisational tolerance can help us to gain a deeper understanding of the thinking and justification process in cases of early-career ethical dilemmas.

Surroundings can also guide ethical decision-making by creating social environments in which a particular group's norms and observed actions directly influence individual choices. Recent research by Osman et al. (2025) shows that students are more likely to imitate or engage in unethical behaviour (such as cheating) when similar actions are prevalent among their peers and unpunished (p. 29). Individuals may adjust their boundaries and views of acceptable behaviour; this "normalization process" highlights the need to address peer dynamics and organisational tolerance for better understanding ethical compromises, especially in early-career settings (p. 32).

The emergence of whistleblowing as a response to organisational ethical failures proves a complex interaction between individual moral standards and the broader social environment.

However, before proceeding, it is crucial to clarify how whistleblowing is defined in this context. For this chapter, we adopted the definition provided by Near and Miceli (1985):

We, therefore, define whistle-blowing to be the disclosure by organization members (former or current) of illegal, immoral, or illegitimate practices under the control of their employers, to persons or organizations that may be able to effect action. (Near and Miceli, 1985, p. 4)

Thus, this process may involve multiple vital decision points for the whistleblower, including recognizing the wrongdoing, deciding to report it, and anticipating the organisation's response (Near and Miceli, 1985, pp.4-5).

The slow normalization of unethical practices might occur when such acts, initially viewed as unacceptable and wrong, become embedded within an organisational culture. Employees may adapt their moral thresholds and tolerate unethical actions as these behaviours become

validated within peer groups. Whistleblowers often face significant barriers and may become unsure whether it is safe to report misconduct (fears of retaliation). These deterrents help suppress ethical dissent and can delay external reporting.

“If wrongdoing is tolerated or encouraged, and if previous whistle-blowing attempts have been met with retaliation, the wrongdoing setting serves only to signal 'don't act'” (Near and Miceli 1985, p.6).

However, it is essential to note that the decision to blow the whistle is influenced by multiple factors, including the whistleblower's personal moral stage of development, availability of social support, and perceived organisational power structures (Near and Miceli 1985, pp 11-12). Therefore, we can conclude that the organisation's response (whether it involves acknowledging wrongdoing or acting on complaints) might directly affect the level of the whistleblowing culture within the organisation.

The discussed findings underscore the importance of organisational responses to unethical behaviour. They can play a pivotal role in both reinforcing and disrupting the normalization of unethical behaviour in the workplace. Organisational cultures that primarily focus on blaming or sanctioning individuals for ethical breaches can inadvertently foster defensiveness, thereby perpetuating unethical practices. More effective strategies would be to focus on changing the organisational system and enabling environments that create opportunities to achieve goals within a person's ethical frames, rather than simply holding individuals personally responsible.

The role of bystander intervention in countering normalization, as we discussed above, has also gained increasing scholarly attention. It has become apparent that speaking out against unethical norms requires significant courage and is more likely to appear when organisations support disclosure, protect against retaliation, and provide spaces for honest feedback.

Despite existing research examining important aspects, such as peer pressure and organisational influences, the specific ways in which peer justifications for unethical behaviour influence young professionals' ethical decision-making remain insufficiently understood. Therefore, further examination of how the surrounding environment affects early-career professionals' choices in realistic dilemmas will provide essential insights into the social mechanisms driving ethical behaviour in the workplace.

2.4 Research Gap

There is a growing consensus regarding the process of ethical decision-making, which should not be studied in isolation from other factors; rather, it is deeply shaped by social environment, peer dynamics, and organisational climate. However, a significant gap remains in the common understanding of how these forces specifically impact young professionals.

Individuals entering the workplace for the first time face unique challenges, which are not comparable to established professionals or to students (where everyone has an equal position): Young employees are still in the beginning of building a reputation, understanding unspoken norms and rules, and striving for advancement within a landscape where peer and managerial influences are often strongest. Yet existing research often underestimates or oversimplifies the nuanced and competing pressures that characterize ethical choices at this stage of a career. The compounded vulnerabilities of young workers are still underexplored in organisational research.

Research methods represent another challenge. Most presented studies rely on laboratory experiments or surveys, which limit the capacity to investigate ethical reasoning and behaviour as they unfold in real workplaces. When reflecting on the limitations of experimental designs, Pascual-Ezama et al. (2015) have argued that “in a typical workspace things are usually more complicated” (p. 11). This motivates the need for in-depth qualitative methods to explore the reasoning processes underlying ethical decision-making. A qualitative approach will enable us to analyze not only actual reasoning but also emotional conflicts.

Moreover, although there are studies which have discussed the influence of coworker support and established team dynamics on decision-making processes, we concur with Byun et al. (2025) who especially emphasize that “future studies should also investigate potential ‘dark side’ effects of coworker support, exploring conditions under which strong peer cohesion might facilitate collective rationalization of unethical behaviour through shared moral disengagement or create conformity pressures normalizing questionable practices” (p. 12).

This study aims to address these gaps by using in-depth interviews to investigate further how peer rationalizations and organisational tolerance (for unethical actions) together shape the ethical decision-making and coping strategies of early-career professionals when they face a career dilemma.

3. Key Theoretical Perspectives

What motivates an individual when they have to make a decision when faced with a moral dilemma at work? And why do people choose different paths in similar situations? The answer to these questions may become especially relevant in the current highly competitive job market, where personal moral values can clash with established corporate norms.

To address the central questions raised in this thesis, the theoretical framework will draw upon Granovetter's (1978) Threshold Model and Hirschman's (1970) Exit, Voice, and Loyalty paradigm. These two perspectives were selected for their complementary explanatory power of young professionals' choices.

Granovetter's (1978) Threshold Model aims to provide a fundamental explanation for how collective behaviour in a company, including the spread and normalization of unethical or morally questionable practices, can emerge from the individual decisions of group members (in this context, colleagues), even when those members might have had entirely different personal understandings of morals and ethics.

It is assumed that the model challenges the widespread idea that group choices and behaviour are merely reflections of shared norms or average preferences. Instead, it demonstrates that subtle variations in individuals' willingness to act or participate in a given action (their "thresholds") can produce major, or even unexpected, shifts in organisational culture and group conduct. By highlighting how minor differences in the distribution of thresholds across a workforce can produce dramatically different outcomes, the threshold model offers a nuanced perspective on how norms, practices, or ethical standards are diffused, resisted, or transformed within peer groups and on the influence this process has on individuals' choices.

This idea aligns closely with evidence from our literature review, indicating that even a small number of visible justifications or breaches can trigger broader shifts in organisational culture, especially under peer pressure.

As a second theoretical framework, Hirschman's Exit, Voice, and Loyalty model (1970) was chosen as it might provide valuable insights into how young professionals respond to organisational dissatisfaction or ethical challenges, when personal ideas of what is "right" are in direct conflict with organisational values and reality. This framework categorizes possible

reactions into three main options: remaining loyal and compliant, actively voicing concerns to effect change, or exiting by withdrawing or leaving the organisation.

Unlike Granovetter's Threshold Model, this framework emphasizes individual agency and diverse coping strategies. By analyzing these two core theories, we aim to gain a deeper understanding of how young professionals navigate ethical dilemmas in organisational environments.

By analyzing these perspectives, this study situates ethical decision-making within the dynamic interplay of peer influence, normative thresholds, and individual strategies for coping with organisational or peer pressures.

3.1 Granovetter's Threshold Model

Among various models of collective behaviour, Granovetter's Threshold Model of Collective Behavior (1978) occupies a particularly influential position, as it posits that individuals (or "agents") decide to perform some action only after the number of other agents performing the same action exceeds a certain personal "threshold".

Building upon Granovetter's personal definition, the core concept is that of the "Threshold": "the number or proportion of others who must make one decision before a given actor does so; this is the point where net benefits begin to exceed net costs for that particular actor" (Granovetter, 1978, p.1420).

The theoretical results of Granovetter's study have found a wide range of applications, including behaviour during strikes, voting in democratic countries, immigration, and educational attainment (Granovetter, 1978, p. 1424). We will continue to build on this foundation and aim to use the Threshold Model to deepen our understanding of how young professionals navigate ethical decisions within complex, often unclear organisational rules and conduct.

Specifically, this model may help us to explain how individual willingness (or unwillingness) to engage in certain behaviour, influenced by peer actions and social context, can contribute to the eventual normalization of ethical or unethical practices among early-career employees.

This perspective is particularly relevant for uncovering the subtle (often silent) social processes that influence moral decision-making in pressured workplace settings. As Granovetter (1978) noted, “threshold models may be of particular value in understanding situations where the average level of preferences clearly runs strongly in favor of some action, but the action is not taken” (p. 1425). Building on this, the focus of this research helps bridge individual-level decision theories with collective dynamics, addressing a key gap in existing workplace ethics studies that often overlook the pivotal role of peer-based influence and social tipping effects, especially in early career stages where young professionals learn to navigate complex organisational structures.

According to Granovetter, “the threshold is simply that point where the perceived benefits to an individual of doing the thing in question (here, joining the riot) exceed the perceived costs” (Granovetter, 1978, p.1423). If we apply this logic to this thesis, we can argue that young professionals may recognize and categorize specific actions by management (or other colleagues) and even company policy as unethical and morally wrong, yet still choose not to speak out. This hesitation can emerge from the perception that the personal risks, such as potential repercussions for career advancement, bullying, or even job security, still outweigh any possible benefit, especially when few others are willing to express dissent and their own standing within the company remains uncertain. In such scenarios, the threshold for action is not yet reached.

Thus, when more voices of disagreement begin to emerge within a team or peer group, the collective action may gradually be seen as more legitimate and less personally risky. At this stage, voicing concerns is no longer interpreted as an isolated act of “rebellion” but instead signals a broader, to some extent “de-individualized” voice, which reduces the perceived probability that management will take action against the whole group. In this way, the perceived net benefits of acting may begin to exceed the costs, thereby prompting more young professionals to participate.

From the perspective of Granovetter’s model, organisational change does not happen automatically, and therefore it should not be analyzed in isolation (Granovetter, 1978, pp. 1436-1437). We can argue that action against ethical misconduct occurs when enough people or members of a group decide they have reached their own tipping point and are ready to act.

Thus, ethical convictions alone may not trigger change or any visible reaction unless social factors and an individual's internal calculations about risks are considered. In other words, the decision to speak up or act depends on how benefits and costs are perceived in a social context, which is dynamic and influenced by others' behaviour. This view highlights the Model's value in explaining the unpredictable and contingent nature of ethical action in workplaces.

3.2 Role of Social Structure and Peer Influence Among Colleagues

Granovetter (1978) emphasized that collective outcomes depend not only on the distribution of individual thresholds but also on the stability of the equilibrium produced by these thresholds when social structures intervene (p.1429). It is essential to clarify what social structure is in this context. We will build on Granovetter's definition, "by 'social structure' I mean here only that the influence any given person has on one's behaviour may depend upon the relationship" (p. 1429). Therefore, people don't just see how many in the whole group act in a certain way; they pay more attention to what their close colleagues do. This can change the way they feel ready to act for themselves, shifting the point at which the group settles into a pattern of behaviour (the equilibrium). We argue that even if an individual's willingness to act stays the same, the strength (closeness) of social connections can make the group's behaviour, whether ethical or unethical, more likely to change. This means that in workplaces with close-knit young professional networks (a group of interns or a few juniors joining an established team), even a slight change in who speaks up or acts ethically can significantly affect decision-making when an ethical dilemma arises.

This interdependence between threshold distributions, network influence, and collective behaviour stability is vividly illustrated in the following **Figure 2**, which shows how small increases in threshold variance can produce nonlinear jumps in group participation.

Figure 2

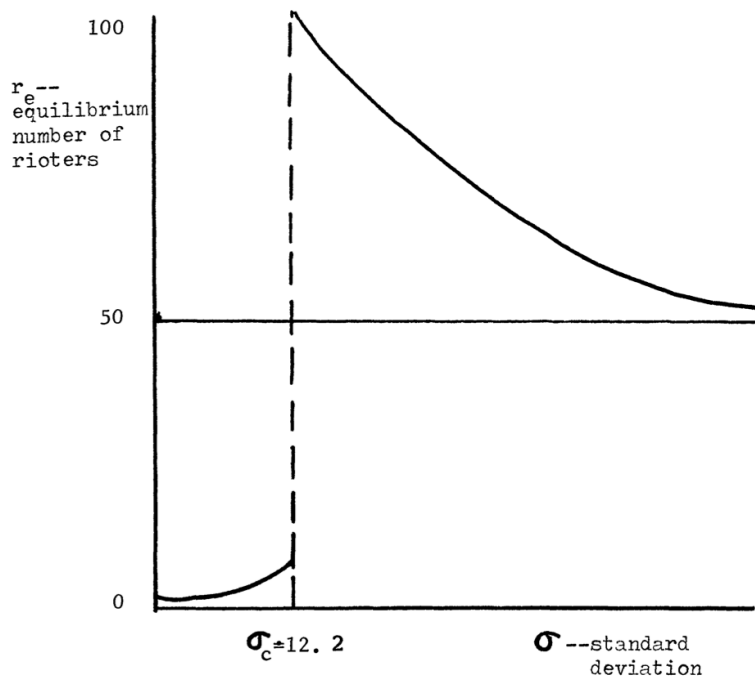


Figure 2: Equilibrium number of rioters as a function of threshold standard deviation

Note. Reproduced from Granovetter, 1978, p. 1428.

To clearly illustrate this concept in an organisational setting, we adapt Granovetter's original example, in which he described how an individual observing that 48 out of 100 people engaged in a riot might not act if those rioters were strangers. However, if many of those 48 were friends (here, friendship intensity is not explicitly defined, so we describe a friend as anyone closer than a stranger), whose behaviour carried twice the usual influence. Therefore, the individual would perceive the participation rate as higher, potentially tipping their decision toward joining the action (Granovetter, 1978, p. 1429).

Figure 2 clearly shows how small increases in threshold variance can produce nonlinear jumps in group participation. If we interpret Granovetter's graph in the context of this study, then the dramatic move at $\sigma = 12.2$ demonstrates the power of peer influence among their colleagues. When peers have similar ethical thresholds, we can argue that collective ethical behaviour becomes highly unstable. In peer groups, small changes in the environment can trigger significant, sudden shifts from widespread ethical compliance to collective ethical compromise. The steep slope would then illustrate that ethical decision-making in peer groups operates more as an “*all-or-nothing dynamic*” rather than a slow, gradual process.

Thus, we assume that when trusted colleagues begin engaging in questionable practices, the probability of widespread adoption jumps dramatically rather than increasing incrementally.

In the context of this study, this suggests that young professionals monitor the ethical conduct of close colleagues within their hierarchical level rather than across the entire organisation. When trusted peers increasingly engage in ethical behaviours (protest), the probability of choosing the “moral way” increases substantially. Thus, we assume that young professionals are not simply conforming; they are responding to changes in their perceived costs (risks) and benefits, based on the threshold distribution within their immediate network.

Building on prior research, we can argue that “most collective behaviors spread through social contact” (Centola & Macy, 2007, p. 702), and that the moderating role of network structure plays an essential role in shaping an individual's behavioural tendencies. We also know that “studies of diffusion dynamics have demonstrated that the structure (or topology) of a social network can have important consequences for the patterns of collective behaviour” (p. 703).

Considering earlier contributions, we can argue that ethical environments within organisations do not necessarily arise from formal or official policies and rules, but are also significantly shaped by ongoing interactions among colleagues in everyday social settings and work situations. This aligns with findings from network science showing that the structure of social ties critically influences behavioural dynamics (Macy & Centola, 2007, pp. 726-730). Moreover, peer influence can modify individuals' moral evaluation of the situation, altering how they weigh ethical considerations before acting (Yu et al., 2021, pp. 11-12). Thus, we can assume that any action taken immediately after the threshold is reached is not an entirely rational calculation but is subtly shaped by social interactions with colleagues.

Limitations:

If we analyze behaviour and decision-making processes exclusively through the lens of Granovetter's threshold model or similar frameworks, we risk overlooking the essential aspects of individual reasoning. We agree with Wiedermann et al. (2020), who stated that “studies of collective behaviour or action, such responses to disasters or even revolution, foster an understanding of the formation and logic of the crowd” (p.1).

Furthermore, it is acknowledged that the motivations behind both ethical and unethical behaviour are far more layered and can be influenced by other social processes, such as social

expectations and norms. Thus, individuals do not simply respond to the presence or absence of collective action; social norms, personal goals, and internalized expectations profoundly shape their choices.

These underlying processes drive not only whether one participates, but also how one participates and in which way and why one expresses dissent. While Threshold and Network models are powerful for predicting when behaviour will tip within a group, we assume that they may overlook other forms of resistance or disengagement, such as silent dissent (leaving the company) or strategic loyalty (even when others protest), which are, in our opinion, also significant in shaping the ethical environment.

For this reason, in the next chapter, we will analyze Hirschman's (1970) framework of Exit, Voice, and Loyalty to fully capture the complexity of ethical decision-making and the multiple ways individuals navigate and challenge organisational norms.

3.3 Hirschman's Exit, Voice, and Loyalty Paradigm

In contrast to Granovetter's Threshold Model, Hirschman (1970) investigated the relative dynamics and effectiveness of alternative responses to dissatisfaction within organisations. Specifically, Hirschman examines the conditions under which individuals are more likely to choose "*exit*" (in our context, leaving the organisation) versus "*voice*" (expressing concerns and dissatisfaction actively or demanding change). Significant attention is paid to exploring which of these responses is more effective for improvement (Hirschman, 1970, pp. 4–7).

It is essential to note that the third option, *loyalty*, frames organisational contexts in a particular way: Hirschman suggests that individuals who have the option to exit may surprisingly choose to stay and express "*voice*" instead if two crucial conditions are met.

First, if they are willing to sacrifice the certainty of leaving for the uncertainty involved in attempting to improve the organisation, and second, if they genuinely believe their efforts can influence an organisation (Hirschman, 1970, pp. 76–77).

According to Hirschman, loyalty may increase the value of "*voice*"; therefore, "as a rule, then, loyalty holds exit at bay and activates voice" (p.78).

With this in mind, this thesis aims to understand not only whether peers influence the ethical decision-making of young professionals and when the "threshold" is reached, but also the (hidden) motives and personal reasoning that shape their choice to resist. When do people decide to stay and “close their eyes”? Or maybe stay, but “fight” for change within their organisation and their right to remain true to themselves? When and why do they decide to give up and leave?

Each of these responses (Exit, Voice, Loyalty) reflects a unique combination of motivations, perceived risks, and potential outcomes. Therefore, it was concluded to analyze them separately (one by one). This theory part aims to highlight the specific conditions and dynamics that may lead individuals to choose one strategy over another. With this approach, we hope for a more nuanced exploration of how organisational structures, peer dynamics, and personal values shape ethical decision-making.

3.3.1 Exit

In Hirschman's framework, “*exit*” refers to individuals' decisions to leave an organisation or cease purchasing a product when they experience dissatisfaction (Hirschman, 1970). When discussing dissatisfaction in this thesis, we define *exit* specifically as the decision to leave an organisation triggered by a conflict between a young professional's personal ethical values and the values upheld by the company, or by an overall perceived decline in the organisation's ethical climate or quality. We bring this understanding beyond *exit* as a simple rational action to highlight its moral and identity-driven nature in contemporary workplaces.

There is no doubt that the decision to exit, especially for young professionals early in their careers, is complex and carries significant consequences. The decision to leave the company is often the final act of withdrawal that signals the organisation's failure to address underlying problems (Hirschman, 1970, pp. 70-75). According to Hirschman, *exit* can catalyze organisational learning and lead to company improvement, but only if managers recognize exit as a symptom of a common problem rather than an individual weakness (Hirschman, 1970, pp. 21–24).

When discussing the choice of exit from an ethical perspective, this act can have considerable consequences for organisational integrity and ethical culture among colleagues.

Exit, in this case, refers to the loss of individuals who engage in civic virtue, defined as citizenship behaviour characterized by constructive participation in organisational governance (Graham, 1995).

Graham defines *civic virtue* as the following behaviour:

- Keeping informed about current (and potential) issues of organisational importance
- Attending non-required meetings
- Giving decision makers timely information and input about organisational policy or practice
- Providing reasoned arguments for proposed changes
- Listening to other points of view.

(Graham, 1995, p. 46)

Consequently, a company loses such morally engaged individuals who serve as critical sources of normative feedback and ethical input. Thus, it potentially allows systemic ethical issues to persist unnoticed and undermines the organisation's moral climate.

As discussed above, for young professionals, “*exit*” is not always readily accessible or desirable. Limited job mobility (especially at the beginning of a career), economic uncertainty, and early career concerns about reputation, such as a bad history on a resume, may constrain exit decisions. Therefore, the moral and psychological costs associated with staying or speaking out might increase.

However, other factors may stop young professionals from choosing exit strategies. According to Withey and Cooper (1989), employees are less willing to leave their organisations when they believe that expressing their concerns can lead to meaningful workplace changes (pp.524-525).

In other words, when they feel that they can have at least minimal control over their work environment, they can bring about some changes.

Boroff & Lewin (1997) agree that individuals who feel they can influence the company through the available voice mechanism are more likely to use voice and less likely to exit the firm (p. 53). Consequently, the inability to exit may compel individuals to engage in alternative forms of resistance or complicity, which makes the ethical landscape of a company even more complicated.

While an increase in ethical exit may signal critical issues to organisational leadership, unanalyzed, silent employee turnover can weaken established ethical norms and diminish supportive peer networks. This erosion may lead to isolation among remaining employees, making them more vulnerable to moral disengagement and unethical conduct (Bandura et al., 2000, p. 197). Silent withdrawal from speaking up can have more severe consequences than expected. For example, silence and the absence of employee voice significantly increase the ongoing issues, such as sexual harassment, discrimination, and workplace safety concerns (Bishop et al., 2021; Hershcovis et al., 2021). Moreover, it contributes significantly to broader corporate scandals and related behaviours (Sims and Brinkmann, 2003, pp. 249-251).

To summarize Hirschman's (1970) contributions, we know that *exit* is a fundamental response to organisational dissatisfaction characterized by several key aspects: it involves leaving an organisation or stopping purchasing as a form of protest (p. 4); serves as a powerful signal of dissatisfaction that can prompt corrective action (p. 23); moreover, according to Hirschman "the decision whether to exit will often be taken in the light of the prospects for the effective use of voice" (p.37).

Building on Hirschman's insight, this thesis aims to expand understanding of exit by exploring its social roots, particularly how peer influence shapes individuals' decisions to exit or choose different forms of dissatisfaction. We assume that peer norms, social pressures, and corporate policies may affect how young professionals make decisions. By revisiting and extending Hirschman's insights, this thesis highlights exit not only as an individual act of leaving but as an essential ethical signal intricately connected to voice, loyalty, and collective influence within peer groups.

3.3.2 Voice

Hirschman (1970) defines *voice* as:

any attempt at all to change, rather than to escape from, an objectionable state of affairs, whether through individual or collective petition to the management directly in charge, through appeal to a higher authority with the intention of forcing a change in management, or through various types of actions and protests, including those that are meant to mobilize public opinion. (p. 30)

In contrast to exit, which involves leaving an organisation or abandoning a product in response to dissatisfaction, voice is a proactive action that aims to address existing issues and, in the best-case scenario, bring about change.

In this thesis, *voice* is conceptualized as a mechanism through which young professionals can articulate their ethical concerns, seek organisational reform, and keep their moral standards while facing career dilemmas. Returning to Graham (1995) and his concept of *organisational citizenship behaviour*, we can argue that by engaging in voice, employees participate in a form of *organisational citizenship* that fosters ethical reflection and discussion and may prevent the need to exit. Thus, Hirschman's expansive understanding of voice as a political and participatory act underscores its critical role in sustaining organisational resilience against ethical decline.

Hirschman (1970) also identified two principles that determine the readiness to use the voice option (when exit remains an option):

(1) the extent to which customer-members are willing
to trade off the certainty of exit against the uncertainties
of an improvement in the deteriorated product; and

(2) the estimate customers have of their ability to influence the organisation. (p.77)

This illustrates that the decision to use voice depends on both the individual's risk tolerance (preferring to stay and attempt change rather than accepting immediate exit) and their perceived ability (power) to effect change.

In the organisational context, we assume that those who believe they can contribute to effective change and are willing to tolerate uncertainty are more likely to use *voice*. At the same time, a low sense of influence or a high need for job security may lead to an *exit*. Thus, the effectiveness of the *voice* mechanism depends not only on employees' loyalty but also on their confidence that their voices will be heard and lead to meaningful reform.

The perceived power or authority to use one's voice to produce meaningful change is also crucial. As was discussed in the previous chapter, Withey & Cooper (1989) argued that

employees are more likely to speak up when they believe their input will be taken seriously and lead to improvements.

Conversely, insecurity and a lack of faith in the ability to bring change can drive individuals toward *exit* (resignation), increasing the risk of silent moral disengagement.

Beyond individual loyalty, peer influence affects employees' voice behaviours. Kim (2022) argues that “with the growing number of work teams, coworker interactions may help an employee’s voice behaviour to be welcomed and obtain the favorable consequences of speaking up” (p.4). It shows that employees surrounded by supportive and morally engaged peers are more likely to speak up because those peers legitimize and reinforce the importance of *voice*.

However, *voice* can also sometimes increase the risk of social friction if perceived as destabilizing to group harmony, because “speaking up involves pointing out the need for improvement of other members and decreases their influence within the team” (Kim 2022, p.12). It can be particularly observed in collectivistic cultures, which usually prefer a conflict-avoidance strategy; therefore, “...voice can negatively affect their social outcomes” (Kim, 2022, p. 12).

Building on Hirschman’s ideas, it is assumed that *voice* is a profoundly social mechanism that goes beyond individual loyalty or perceived ability to influence outcomes. For young professionals, peer relationships can mitigate fears of reprisal, create collective norms that validate ethical concerns and resistance to unethical practices, and, as a result, empower *voice*.

3.3.3 Loyalty

Building on Hirschman’s insights, loyalty plays a vital role in shaping employees’ responses and reactions to dissatisfaction within organisations. Hirschman (1970) notes that “high fees for entering an organisation and stiff penalties for exit are among the main devices generating or reinforcing loyalty in such a way as to repress either exit or voice or both” (p. 93).

Consequently, such constraints can function as barriers that encourage members of an organisation to remain engaged and stay with the company, rather than leave, even though they might simultaneously suppress the willingness to express dissatisfaction openly.

This “binding” effect of *loyalty* can manifest in behaviour as individuals modulate their use of *voice* and *exit* in response to growing dissatisfaction. An illustration of this dynamic is shown in **Figure 3**, where the horizontal axis measures the degree of disagreement, going from complete agreement on the right to utter disagreement (with organisational policies) on the left. The vertical axis illustrates the amount of effective *voice*, defined as the active efforts a member makes to express dissatisfaction and motivation to change (Hirschman, 1970, p. 87).

Figure 3

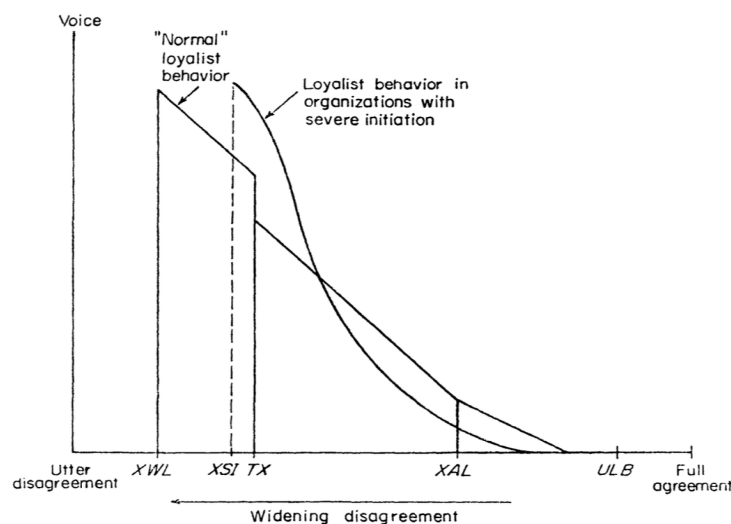


Figure 3: Loyalist behaviour in the face of increasing disagreement with an organisation

Note. Reproduced from Hirschman, 1970, Figure 1, p.87

This illustrates the process by which an initially loyal member of an organisation moves from a state of total agreement (loyalty) toward a growing degree of disagreement. Interestingly, the probability of using *voice* increases as an individual tries to influence the process, and this willingness to influence it grows as disagreement rises (Hirschman, 1970, p. 88).

However, if the situation does not improve and a person cannot influence the processes they disagree with, loyalty will eventually decline, and an actual exit can occur.

Thus, the horizontal axis illustrates the quality of an organisation, ranging from complete agreement with its policies to total disagreement. The vertical axis measures the amount of compelling *voice* that is forthcoming in response to various degrees of disagreement (Hirschman, 1970, p.87).

To gain a deeper understanding of how Hirschman's loyalty dynamics may apply to young professionals' ethical decision-making, we will analyze this model within the context of peer influence and organisational attachment.

The Three Critical Points in Young Professionals' Ethical Decision-Making:

XAL (Point of Exit in Absence of Loyalty): This represents the threshold where individuals without organisational attachment would immediately leave when ethical disagreements arise. However, as Hirschman explains, "loyalty now acts as a brake on the decision to exit. The loyal member does not *exit*, but something happens to him: he begins to be acutely unhappy about continuing as a member" (p.87).

For young professionals, this point reflects when their career investments and relationship-building create loyalty bonds that prevent immediate exit despite ethical concerns. Instead of leaving the individual, avoid making such a drastic change:

He will make stronger attempts than hitherto to change the line and will intensify the use of voice in its various forms for this purpose; hence, we show a kink in the voice function at this point, and a steeper slope after it. (Hirschman, 1970, p.88)

TX (Point of Threat of Exit): As disagreement intensifies:

The member will have thoughts of exit and threaten it if that action can be at all expected to enhance the effectiveness of the voice. The threat of exit means a discontinuous increase in the amount of voice that is forthcoming. (Hirschman, 1970, p.88)

This explains the vertical slope - young professionals leverage their potential departure as bargaining power to amplify their ethical concerns.

XWL (Point of Exit With Loyalty): Eventually, "loyalty reaches its breaking point, and exit ensues" (Hirschman, 1970, p.88). This represents the moment when accumulated ethical conflicts overcome organisational attachment, leading to departure despite the professional and personal costs involved.

Application to Young Professionals' Peer-Influenced Environment:

The distance between XAL and XWL - what Hirschman (1970) calls “a more inclusive concept of loyalist behavior” (p.88) is particularly relevant for understanding how young professionals navigate peer pressure within ethical dilemmas. Their loyalty extends to their tolerance for organisational practices they disagree with, making them more susceptible to peer influence during this extended period of internal conflict.

During the TX-XWL phase, when young professionals are “liable to use the threat of exit for the purpose of changing the policies of the organization” (Hirschman, 1970, p.88), peer support becomes crucial in determining whether voice efforts succeed or ultimately lead to *exit*. This period represents a critical window where peer validation can either strengthen voice attempts or accelerate the path to *exit*.

In the context of young professionals navigating ethical challenges at work, we can assume that their attachment to the organisation (for various reasons) may encourage them to raise concerns and resist unethical practices with voice rather than leaving immediately, especially when *exit* options are limited or costly.

We know that supportive peer networks may strengthen loyalty by validating ethical concerns and encouraging voice (Kim et al., 2022, pp. 3-5). Thus, loyalty, mainly when influenced (supported) by peers, helps prevent people from leaving or staying silent, and encourages them to speak up about ethical concerns. For young professionals who may lack strong standing and power within a company, loyalty, combined with supportive peers, might be key to staying engaged in moral and ethical matters and to raising concerns.

3.3.4 Research Propositions

When reflecting on the theoretical discussion analyzed in this chapter, it becomes clear that the ethical decisions made by young professionals are rarely shaped solely by personal values. Instead, as both theories highlighted, these decisions emerge from the ongoing interplay between what is observed in the workplace and what is validated in peer groups. Thus, we can assume that the ethical organisational environment is built not only by the official company's conduct and policies, but also by the silent yet dynamic social processes, unwritten norms, and everyday practices that signal what is truly tolerated or challenged within this particular workplace. In other words, this means that both peer behaviour and organisational norms can be seen as forces that guide individual ethical choices.

Based on these theoretical foundations, this study formulates the following research proposition:

Peer influence affects young professionals' moral decision-making by lowering individual thresholds for engaging in peer-normative behaviours, which can increase participation in ethically questionable actions or encourage collective responses such as voice or exit.

Building on this proposition, the next chapter outlines the methodological framework. We see ethical decision-making and argumentation as a complex, highly context-dependent phenomenon. Therefore, qualitative in-depth interviews have been selected as the most suitable approach. This method would enable us to conduct a richer, more profound exploration of participants' lived experiences and organisational contexts, thereby facilitating a nuanced understanding of ethical compromises and resistance in practice. The following chapter will focus on details of the research design, participant selection, and analytical strategies employed to address the research proposition.

4. Methodology

The present study adopts a qualitative interview approach to capture nuanced insights into ethical decision-making among young professionals. This approach was chosen to provide a flexible yet systematic way to capture subtle details, while allowing participants to evaluate given scenarios on their own.

The interview consisted of open-ended introductory questions about participants' current position, organisation, and career-related plans, as well as five concrete hypothetical scenarios that reflected different workplace dilemmas, with targeted follow-up questions.

The semi-structured format suits our research topic, in which understanding subjective experiences and personal justifications is essential (Kallio et al., 2016, p.2959).

We acknowledge that, due to practical and organisational constraints, the participant group does not represent a perfectly random sample. Recruitment was primarily voluntary, which may introduce a degree of self-selection bias, a standard limitation in qualitative interview studies (Robinson, 2014, p. 35). However, our research requires trust and openness of participants to gain valuable answers, therefore:

“In interviews, extensive intimate self-disclosure is sometimes required, and this is likely to lead to a sample containing individuals who are more open, more patient, and more interested in the topic than the general sample universe” (Robinson, 2014, p. 36).

For this Master's Thesis, six semi-structured interviews were conducted. The group of participants consisted of an equal number of men and women, between the ages of 26 and 33. All participants held junior to mid-senior positions across different organisations and sectors. Despite the variety of industries, all participants shared similar socio-economic backgrounds and were situated at comparable stages of their career progression.

As this study aims to capture depth of understanding rather than statistical representation, this sample size enabled us to develop meaningful insights while avoiding potential data overload. It also allowed each participant to speak longer and to be recognized with a distinct identity, rather than being treated simply as an indistinguishable member of a large sample (Robinson, 2014, p. 29).

For this Master's Thesis, all conducted interview recordings were transcribed using the MAXQDA program. For a nuanced understanding of intonations and participants' overall reactions, the classic MAXQDA version was chosen (without AI assistance), which enabled precise time-coded documentation aligned with the audio recordings and a more detailed reconstruction of spoken content. For the content analysis of the conducted interviews, Mayring's (2014) methodological guidelines were used.

4.1 Research Design

In this chapter, we will continue with a description of participant selection and sampling strategies. In conclusion, we will discuss some ethical considerations and limitations.

A qualitative method enables us not only to draw conclusions from numbers but also to explore how people see and experience the world around them. It also allows us to learn about participants' everyday actions and knowledge, and provides valuable insights into the subject of this research (Flick, 2023, p. 14).

Building on this foundation, this study seeks to understand the justifications that guide individuals' ethical and moral reasoning and the argumentation in hypothetical workplace scenarios.

By selecting a semi-structured interview method, we aimed to achieve a good balance by maintaining a guided yet flexible structure that helps standardize data across participants and allows them to go deeper into the topic. Therefore, the interview included a predetermined set of core questions and career-related scenarios, as well as follow-up (adjusted) questions, which were asked based on participant responses. This enabled a more detailed exploration of participants' complex social and personal thinking processes. Such an approach encourages respondents to “focus on the issues that were meaningful for the participant” (Kallio et al., 2016, p. 2959) and to express their authentic perspectives and perceptions on topics such as peer influence in ethical decision-making.

Similarly, Rubin and Rubin (2012) emphasize that semi-structured interviewing enables a conversational format that allows for understanding of participants' attitudes and lived experiences (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, pp. 21-23).

Unlike survey interviews, in which those giving information are relatively passive and are not allowed the opportunity to elaborate, in qualitative interviews, interviewees share in the work and the fun of discovery, often guiding the questioning in channels of their own choosing. (p.24)

To align our research instrument with the study's theoretical framework, the interview guide is constructed around five hypothetical workplace scenarios that cover the main topics of Albert O. Hirschman's (1970) Exit-Voice-Loyalty framework and enriched by concepts from the Threshold Theory of Granovetter (1978).

The following scenarios were created:

1. Promotion Decision Under Ethical Pressure
2. Responding to Workplace Discrimination
3. Considering Job Offers from Controversial Industries
4. Participating in Unethical Expense Usage
5. Negative Changes in Organisational Policy

Each scenario presented a realistic situation involving peer dynamics and allowed participants to evaluate how their decision-making might change. Scenarios represented different ethical dilemmas without making the purpose obvious to the participants. This design allowed for the revelation of implicit norms, dynamics between colleagues, moral thresholds, and personal values.

In summary, the research design aims to enable an empirical exploration of how and why young professionals act and think in morally ambiguous workplace situations while navigating the need for social belonging alongside societal, personal, and peer expectations.

4.2 Sample and Participant Selection

We acknowledge that choosing an appropriate, well-thought-out sampling strategy is vital to ensuring the relevance and value of qualitative research findings, particularly when studying complex social phenomena such as ethics and peer influence: "Purposeful, strategic sampling can yield crucial information about critical cases" (Patton, 2015, p. 467).

In this study, we followed Robinson's four-point sampling framework for interview-based qualitative research (Robinson, 2014, pp. 26–27), as well as recommendations on purposive sampling and sample size decisions from the qualitative methodology literature (e.g., Patton, 2015; Kallio et al., 2016).

To visualize the systematic progression from population to actual participants, Robinson's model explicitly distinguishes the sample universe between inclusion/exclusion criteria and the final sample:

Figure 4

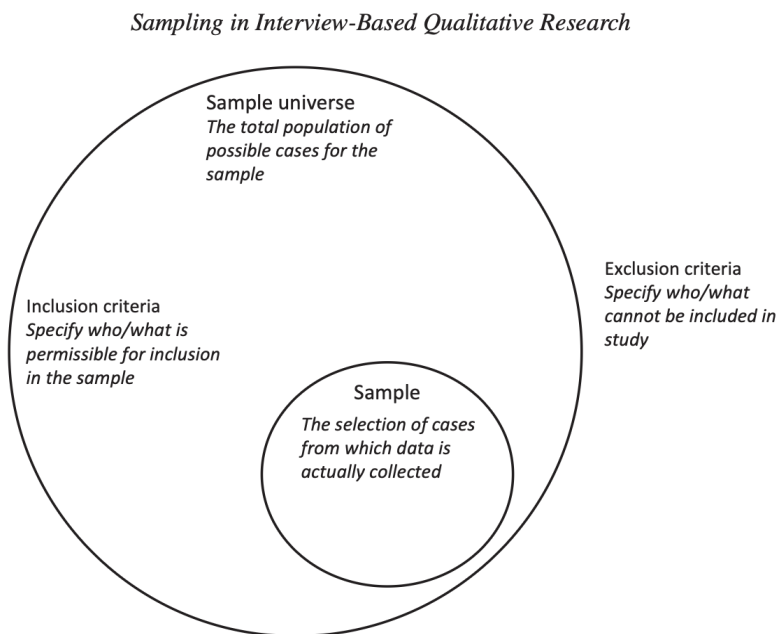


Figure 4: Sample universe, inclusion/exclusion criteria, and sample

Note. Reproduced from Robinson, 2014, Figure 1, p 27.

By applying the same approach, we aim to make these borders explicit to strengthen the study's methodological transparency.

The sample universe included young professionals in Austria aged 26–33, who worked in competitive fields such as Big Technology, Oil, Energy, or Media Companies.

The participant group was identified based on a review of Patton (2015), which emphasizes that “In-depth information from a small number of people can be very valuable, especially if the cases are information-rich” (p. 470). Robinson (2014) also emphasized that clear and structured (coherent) inclusion and exclusion criteria may increase the comparability and interpretability of findings (pp. 27–29).

Our Inclusion criteria required that participants fulfill the following requirements:

- Be actively employed at junior or mid-senior levels within a company
- Have direct experience with workplace collaboration and working with a team
- Be willing to discuss personal values and ethical views
- Possess language proficiency in English or German for interview purposes

Exclusion criteria for participation were:

- Individuals who are employed in non-corporate settings
- People who are working in roles without regular colleagues, independent in a workplace without social dynamics
- Temporary, seasonal, or ad hoc jobs without stable teams and ongoing workplace relationships
- Individuals with long-established careers and social standing within the organisation

Participants were carefully selected through professional networks and direct outreach, with all applicants screened according to the defined criteria before selection.

The final study sample consisted of six participants (three women and three men); the sample size was chosen to achieve analytical depth and honesty rather than statistical generalizability. The ultimate goal was to enable detailed, nuanced exploration of ethical reasoning and potential peer influence within real workplace contexts. As Patton (2015) emphasizes, “small samples that are truly in-depth have provided many of the most important breakthroughs in our understanding of the phenomenon under study” (p. 473).

Thus, through dynamic, trusted engagement with participants, the study aims to describe ethical reasoning and to gain a nuanced understanding of how everyday choices and peer relationships within organisations shape it.

We acknowledge that a trusting relationship between the researcher and participants in this study, which is essential for obtaining rich, detailed, and honest responses, may also influence participants' answers, as they may wish to please the interviewer or filter their responses in line with the researcher's personal views. The relatively small, specific (filtered) sample might further limit the generalizability of the findings beyond a similar organisational context.

5. Findings

In the following chapter, we will present the results of six interviews conducted specifically to explore whether and how peer influence may shape participants' ethical decision-making.

Each interview transcript was systematically coded and condensed using the principles of qualitative content analysis to ensure careful, transparent, and traceable interpretation of meaning (with minimal paraphrasing). The findings are presented according to the main themes identified through this process. Each theme reflects recurring patterns and variations in participants' experiences and reasoning; this structure aims to emphasize both shared tendencies and individual differences in how participants react and evaluate ethical dilemmas, as well as social influences within their professional environments.

5.1 Overview of Code Distributions

Theoretical codes such as “*Exit*,” “*Voice*,” and “*Loyalty*” were defined deductively from the literature (Hirschman, 1970). At the same time, additional codes, such as ‘Personal Red Lines’ and ‘*Social Dynamics and Relationships*,’ were identified inductively through close examination of the interview material. It is important to note that the code ‘Peer Threshold’ was initially inspired by Threshold Theory (Granovetter, 1978) but was further refined and contextualized through analyses of participants’ answers and narratives.

As shown in **Figure 5**, these inductively developed codes ultimately accounted for the largest share of coded segments. They highlighted the main direction of participants’ experiences, thereby shaping the study's primary thematic focus.

Thus, code distributions (Figure 5) clearly show that “*Personal Red Lines*,” “*Social Dynamics and Relationships*,” and “*Peer Threshold*” can be described as dominating for the segments, supporting the focus on these core themes.

Figure 5

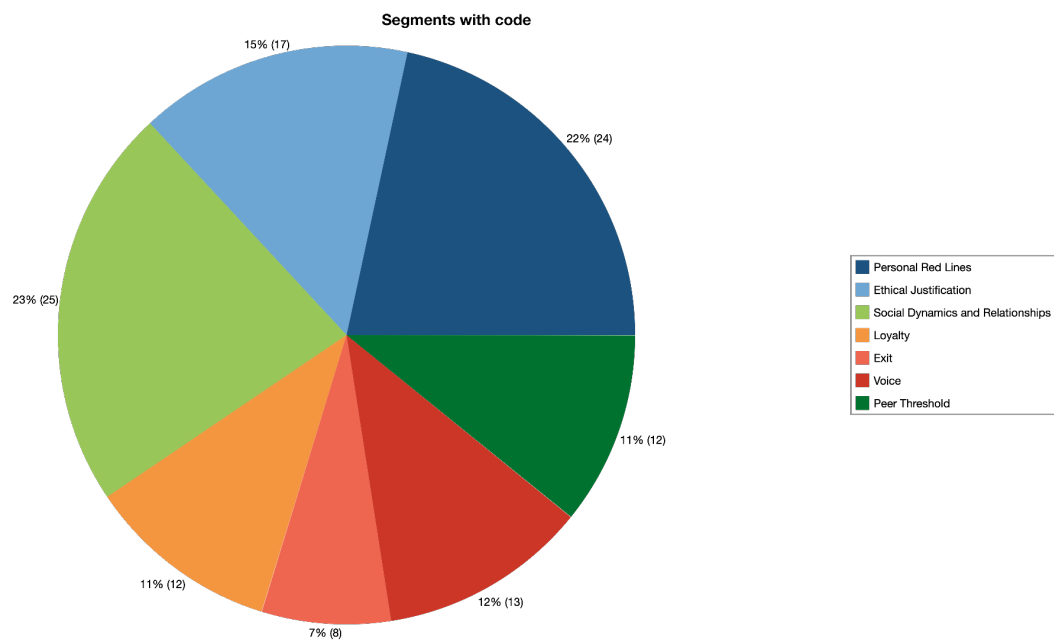


Figure 5: Segments with codes (MAXQDA)

At the same time, in the following **Table 1**, we aimed to illustrate how often key codes appeared together, within participants' responses. The table was created using the Segment Matrix function in MAXQDA, which enables us to compare the main topics and see how they overlap (or not) in the interview.

Instead of showing only how each topic appears in isolation, this matrix could highlight where essential themes, such as peer thresholds, personal boundaries, social dynamics, loyalty, and ethical justification, were discussed together by participants.

Thus, we can argue that these overlaps reveal the areas in which different ideas and arguments were most strongly connected. This illustration also contributes to the main picture and highlights the central issues and experiences of the participants.

Table 1

Code System	Interview 1	Interview 2	Interview 3	Interview 4	Interview 5	Interview 6
Personal Red Lines						
Ethical Justification						
Social Dynamics and Relationships						
Loyalty						
Exit						
Voice						
Peer Threshold						

Table 1: Code Matrix (MAXQDA)

5.2 Peer Threshold Effects

We will systematically examine how the principal codes (illustrated in Figure 5) interact with one another within the interview data. **Table 2** describes our analyzed code intersections, such as “*Peer Threshold*” with “*Personal Red Lines*,” “*Ethical Justification*,” “*Loyalty*,” and “*Voice*”. Thus, this section aims to illustrate the nuances of group dynamics and normative pressures that shape young professionals’ moral reasoning in workplace dilemmas.

Table 2

	Personal Red Lines	Ethical Justification	Social Dynamics and Relationships	Loyalty	Exit	Voice
Peer Threshold	5	4		1		2

Table 2: Code Relations Browser (MAXQDA)

Before presenting quote evidence, it is essential to describe how we defined these core categories. When drawing directly on coding memos, “*Peer Threshold*” captures statements where willingness or resistance to unethical acts depends on peer group behaviour:

“If everyone does it, I will too.”

As the memo specifies, these are segments where participants initially resist specific actions but become more willing or flexible after seeing that many colleagues do the same. “*Personal Red Lines*” in our context represent self-defined boundaries that participants set regarding behaviours or situations they refuse to accept (our coding memos clarify these are ethical limits considered non-negotiable, at least initially).

5.2.1 Peer Threshold × Personal Red Lines

As can be observed in the memo of this segment, our Pattern and Key Findings can be described as follows:

Pattern: When peer participation in ethically questionable behaviours becomes widespread, participants describe a lowering of personal moral boundaries that they initially considered non-negotiable (“*red lines*”). The five segments reveal that collective normalization of unethical practices weakens individual resistance to crossing ethical lines, especially when behaviour is normalized within their peer group.

Key Finding: Personal Red Lines (ethical boundaries) that participants would usually refuse to cross become flexible and permeable when peer behaviour signals normalization or total acceptance. Participants explicitly state they “would probably do it” when “everybody does it,” demonstrating how threshold effects overrule initial moral commitments.

In other words, in this combination of codes, we observed that participants frequently shifted their personal ethical “red lines” (as they mentioned earlier) when faced with normalized ethical ambiguity or questionable practices among colleagues.

For example, one participant reflected:

“I think the honest answer would be that I would do it as well, because if it’s normalized, then it just becomes part of how things are done” (Participant 1).

Four out of six interviewees described this collective normalization as gradually reducing resistance and eroding formerly established boundaries:

“If it is normalized and everybody advocates for this, then at some point, you can almost consider it like a business benefit when everybody does it” (Participant 5) or

“When it becomes completely normal, maybe I will lose my strictness” (Participant 2).

Similarly, another participant justified dishonest use of corporate expenses as follows:

“... I would probably do it as well, since it’s like, from the small corporate employee to the big boss, everyone does it” (Participant 1).

Based on these answers, we can argue that the main tendencies align with Granovetter's Threshold model, in which an actor's boundary for crossing an ethical line is not rigid but shifts in line with perceived peer practices and group norms.

This underscores that ethical boundaries in organisational life can be reconstructed collectively, not just individually.

5.2.2 Peer Threshold × Ethical Justification

Before presenting the empirical evidence, it is essential to clarify how our next code couple was operationalized based on coding memos.

“Peer Threshold” captures statements in which willingness or resistance to unethical acts depends on peer group behaviour; specifically, segments in which participants shift their stance and become more flexible after seeing that most colleagues do the same.

“Ethical Justification” was defined in memos as rationalizations of questionable actions based on peer or organisational norms and was coded when our participants explained or excused unethical behaviour as common, accepted, or tolerated by their colleagues or workplace.

Pattern and Key Finding (per Memo):

The intersection of *“Peer Threshold”* and *“Ethical Justification”* illustrates that when questionable behaviours (earlier articulated in the interview) become normalized within the peer group, participants actively reevaluate their views and construct pragmatic justifications for their own compliance.

Two main justification mechanisms were observed:

1. Reframing the behaviour as routine (it just becomes part of how things are done)
2. Introducing contingency factors (it depends on the amount of money”, “is it severely impacting the business?).

This aligns with the concept of *organisational moral disengagement* (OrgMD) by Fida et al. (2024), which demonstrated that the normalization of questionable practices fosters a climate in which rationalizations not only permit but also encourage such behaviour.

In the following example, the participant justifies (or seeks reasons to justify) his approach to the ethical dilemma by reframing it as a pragmatic, rational issue. The focus shifts to potential costs and organisational impact rather than the moral principle itself.

“It depends on how much money it costs for the company... is it severely impacting the business...? And how is the rest of the overall benefit package?” (Participant 5).

More generally, this pattern shows that in environments where ethical ambiguity is normalized, individuals are not just passively conforming: they are also reshaping their own sense of justification to fit emergent group norms, rather than holding fast to previously discussed standards.

5.2.3 Peer Threshold × Loyalty and Voice

Our findings reveal that Hirschman’s (1970) concept of *loyalty*, understood in our context as commitment to the organisation driven by peer influence, was not supported by participants.

“I think I would look for something else even if my colleagues weren't” (Participant 3).

Instead, loyalty among young professionals appeared independent of peer pressure and was primarily rooted in personal or other social factors, such as team quality and individual career goals.

I think I will leave the company. From my previous experience, I know that the atmosphere is just as important as the stress level at work. The work environment and conditions have to fit. If the atmosphere or workload became unbearable, I’d definitely reconsider staying.
(Participant 4)

Even though *loyalty* in our study is not necessarily seen as a commitment to the organisation, but also as a silent acceptance (especially when voice was ignored), participants consistently and clearly articulated their willingness to leave, regardless of peer actions or group norms. However, it is essential to note that this decision was always driven by personal discomfort or misalignment with professional goals, rather than by ethical concerns.

This suggests that, contrary to Hirschman’s model, loyalty in our sample was not substantially influenced by peer pressure or collective commitment, but primarily by individual factors and personal (often emotional) reasons.

Conversely, the concept of voice appeared in an interesting form. According to our analyses of the interaction between *Peer Threshold* and *Voice*, participants were generally willing to speak up against unethical practices even without support. Peers would only be seen as an extra support factor in enabling more confident action.

“If you’re supported, it’s much easier to make decisions... you feel more confident about them” (Participant 4).

5.3 Social Dynamics Effects

The following section focuses on the next vital factor, next to *Peer Influence*, and aims to clarify how workplace relationships influence ethical decision-making among young professionals. “*Social Dynamics and Relationships*” was defined as the role of interpersonal closeness, team climate, collegiality, and overall atmosphere in shaping moral decisions and in enabling people to act or speak up in challenging situations. This category captures segments in interviews where participants discuss how the quality of relationships with colleagues either facilitates or complicates ethical action.

In other words, the following analysis examines how dependence on group relationships and the workplace's overall social climate both enable and constrain ethical behaviour, illuminating the protective as well as the challenging aspects of social dynamics in the everyday organisational life of young professionals.

It is important to note that two codes, *loyalty* and *voice*, showed strong interactions with *social dynamics and relationships*; five of six participants mentioned these two codes in relation to *Social Dynamics* (as illustrated in **Table 3** below). Our results reveal that both the tendency to remain loyal to the organisation and the willingness to speak up in challenging situations were closely linked to the general climate of collegiality and the atmosphere within a team rather than to direct peer pressure or simple compliance.

Table 3

Code System	Personal Red Lines	Ethical Justification	Loyalty	Exit	Voice
 Social Dynamics and Relationships	3	2	5	1	5

Table 3: Code Relations Browser (MAXQDA)

This co-occurrence pattern, illustrated in the Code Relations Browser visualization, demonstrates once again that positive relational environments and open, trusting communication may help shape these responses among young professionals. Thus, we can argue that social dynamics play a vital role in both organisational commitment and active engagement through voice, indicating that a poor relational climate can be a driver of exit or disengagement.

5.3.1 Social Dynamics × Loyalty

A key finding from our analysis is that *loyalty* among young professionals is not primarily rooted in compliance with peer norms, but instead in the overall quality of workplace relationships and team climate. This was consistently reflected in participant statements, such as:

“Yes, we have a really good team, that’s one of the reasons why I wouldn’t change my job” (Participant 4).

While discussing reasons to stay or leave a company, participants emphasized the importance of the overall atmosphere, as well as personal interests and professional goals.

Five out of six young professionals were not influenced by peer decisions to stay or leave the company. Rather than conforming to group pressure as expected, young professionals described their choices as closely linked to their emotional well-being at work, the quality of relationships within the team, a sense of productive collaboration, and opportunities for personal and career growth.

The interview data suggest that factors such as collegiality, a favorable climate, and alignment with individual ambitions far outweigh the influence of peer actions and collective decisions regarding retention.

“It all depends on whether I feel that people are working productively together, that there are growth opportunities, and that the projects I’m doing are interesting for me” (Participant 5).

Trusted, close relationships with colleagues often made it uncomfortable for participants to simply disagree with or go along with company decisions without reflection. When participants observed their colleagues facing the consequences of company policies, they were less inclined to blindly comply or stay loyal to the organisation without considering their own position.

“That’s no lie, but yeah, the dynamics for the environment and surroundings are also important, and it’s hard for me when they disagree” (Participant 2).

However, it is important to mention that even trusting relationships with peers have not motivated individuals to compromise on their own interests or goals to maintain harmony within the team. This shows that loyalty is shaped more by positive relationships within the team than by simply following others or giving in to peer pressure.

5.3.2 Social Dynamics × Voice

The interplay between voice and social relationships reveals once again the complex social interactions of ethical action in organisational contexts. As it was discussed before, voice is defined as the expressed willingness or actual behaviour of speaking up against unethical, unfair, or problematic practices at work. *Social Dynamics* describe the quality of interpersonal relationships, team climate, trust, and perceived peer support that shape how safe or feasible individuals feel in expressing dissent.

The interviews highlight that *voice* is rarely exercised in isolation; rather, it is deeply contingent upon supportive social contexts. For instance, one participant shared the following insight:

I would care about such things, and I would definitely support them. I would use my influence to maybe also find a way to talk to our boss about it, and if it wasn’t in my power to handle it directly, I would support my colleagues as a group so that we could approach him together and try to address the issue. (Participant 6)

Moreover, young professionals noted that a workplace culture where they openly communicate and express their ideas or opinions significantly lowers barriers to raising concerns:

“Yeah, definitely. If the whole environment and culture are more open about things, it’s easier to talk about the elephant in the room, I would say” (Participant 1).

The presence of others speaking up also acts as a powerful motivator and source of confidence:

“Of course, if you're supported, it's much easier to make decisions. I mean, I think it's in every life area when the people you're close with support your decisions, you feel more confident about them” (Participant 3).

These statements illustrate the socially contagious nature of *voice*: when vocal dissent is collective or supported, individuals feel psychologically safer and more empowered to express their concerns. The social dimension thus transforms voice from a potentially risky individual act into a shared endeavor.

We can argue that our findings align with Hirschman's (1970) theory, which, as discussed in the Theory section, posits that *voice* serves as an alternative to *exit* (pp. 36-43).

In our context, the strength of attachment and trust within teams acts as a protective factor that enables ethical voice. In other words, our findings suggest that *voice* may not be simply an individual act of dissent but a socially embedded behaviour that can be reinforced and promoted by supportive social relationships. This aligns with Hirschman's conceptualization of *voice* as a relational and collective process.

5.3.3. Social Dynamics and Relationships × Personal Red Lines

In this section, we will look at our final code pair. According to the code relations table (Table 3, p. 42), this pair shows three co-occurrences out of six, compared with the *loyalty* and *voice* pair. Notably, the code *Exit* also exhibits distinct dynamics and will therefore be discussed separately in its own section.

The focus here is on how personal ethical boundaries (*Red Lines*) interact with workplace relationships and team climate, reflecting the nuanced ways in which social environments can either reinforce or challenge individuals' willingness to uphold their own standards in the workplace. Our findings for this intersection show that strong, positive team relationships and social support actually reinforce participants' ability to maintain their personal moral standards.

Our analysis shows that social dynamics can both shift and reinforce ethical boundaries. As we discussed in the analysis of *Peer Threshold* and *Personal Red Lines* code couple, strong peer influence and collective normalization of questionable practices often weaken individual resistance and make previously non-negotiable "red lines" more flexible.

"Yeah, as I said, definitely tempting, and I probably, if everybody would do it, and it's kind of okay" (Participant 5).

At the same time, the effect of social relationships was the opposite. In contexts of close teamwork, participants also described being “on the soft side,” showing readiness to negotiate or find solutions that maintain team harmony and ethical integrity, especially when mutual respect was high.

For example, in the dilemma of a promotion decision, one participant found it difficult to just accept a great offer when knowing it would cost the job of one of his colleagues:

So, I think when I have to do this, when that is my job, and I get paid for it, I would, yeah, make sure or would communicate with my colleagues, and maybe would help to find another position or something like that. (Participant 2)

A trusting, close relationship with teams, especially when the team was relatively small, made it especially hard for people to prioritise their own interests.

“If it were a bigger team, then hypothetically, I wouldn’t be as close to everyone, and I could approach it in a more analytical way, for example, by looking at who performs the best” (Participant 6).

The process often involved reflecting on the needs and perspectives of others, rather than rigidly defending personal interests, and maintaining personal red lines when the environment supported open dialogue and trust.

These findings align with existing organisational research, which emphasizes that social dynamics are not only sources of pressure for conformity but can also serve as essential mechanisms for encouraging ethical behaviour. In other words, ethical decision-making goes beyond just established organisational practices and “...*embedded in a supportive cultural context*” (Baljevic et al. 2025, p.167).

Thus, we argue that teams and organisational climates can enable open dialogue, trust, and supportive relationships. In doing so, they play a vital role in preventing unethical peer influence and in actively promoting ethical behaviour.

5.4 Exit

Exit stands out in our study as a distinct category and will therefore be discussed separately, as it has no overlap with peer influence or social dynamics codes.

It is well illustrated in the following code Matrix:

Table 4

Code System	Exit
 Social Dynamics and Relationships	1
 Peer Threshold	

Table 4: Code Relations Browser (MAXQDA)

Unlike other code categories, which were shaped (to some extent or fully) by team climate, interpersonal relationships, and collective pressure, exit rarely overlapped with “*Peer Threshold*” or “*Social Dynamics and Relationships*” codes.

Instead, participants consistently described their decisions or reasons to leave as arising solely from personal dissatisfaction with organisational structures or unmet professional goals, rather than as a response to group dynamics or peer pressure.

Our analysis of the interview data on “*exit*” reveals an omnipresent pattern linked to individualistic views among young professionals when they decide to leave or stay in the organisation. Five out of six participants expressed readiness to leave the company for personal reasons, rather than under peer influence. Young professionals described their decision to leave as driven by organisational factors such as a lack of responsibility from senior leadership (bad management):

“And when no one, especially from the senior members or leads, takes responsibility, that’s a big problem for me” (Participant 1).

Or persistent disrespect:

“And for me, it’s not important if the other colleagues don’t want to leave, but if I don’t feel safe or I feel disrespected or I don’t feel good anymore, I would consider leaving the company” (Participant 2).

As another essential reason for an *exit* was mentioned, poor work atmosphere, unmanageable stress levels, and lack of appreciation:

“The work environment and conditions have to fit. If the atmosphere or workload became unbearable, I’d definitely reconsider staying” (Participant 4) or similarly, “a toxic work culture would definitely make me leave” (Participant 5).

These findings offer a nuanced view of Hirschman’s (1970) *exit* concept, demonstrating that, at least within this context, exit decisions are not necessarily linked to the absence of voice opportunity and are shaped by individual-level dissatisfaction rather than collective influences or pressures. Voice, loyalty, and adaptation to group norms shape much of organisational life, but the act of exit in this sample is marked by an apparent absence of peer-driven reasons.

6. Discussion

Our findings, presented in a previous chapter, illustrated how nuanced and, without a doubt, complicated the nature of ethical decision-making can be. Drawing on Hirschman’s (1970) framework and Granovetter’s (1978) Threshold Theory, our results demonstrate that the influence of peers and social climate is neither universal nor absolute. While *peer thresholds* and *team dynamics* may shape workplace ethics and behaviours, such as *loyalty* and *voice*, the act (decision) of *exit* is a more individualistic choice and is influenced mainly by personal dissatisfaction and unmet professional goals.

At the heart of these findings lie not only evidence of the substantial role of peer influence in shaping moral decision-making, but also recognition that such influence is not unidirectional. Instead, we argue that the way peers shape moral behaviour is deeply contingent upon patterns of normalization, the construction of group norms, and the presence (or absence) of supportive relationships with colleagues and overall atmosphere within the organisation.

We found support for the core of Granovetter's (1978) Threshold Theory in participants' tendency to shift personal "red lines" in response to peer behaviour (influence). Multiple interviewees articulated their boundaries and behaviour at the very beginning of the interview, which they considered unacceptable, and, over time, they became increasingly normalized as more colleagues engaged in similar behaviour. Quotes such as "If everyone does it, I will too" and "when it becomes completely normal, maybe I will lose my strictness" (Participants 1, 3, and 5) demonstrate once more how threshold effects operate in the real corporate world, with collective participation and also with peer approval lowering individual resistance to unethical practices.

This finding directly substantiates our theoretical expectation that moral boundaries in organisations are reconstructed collectively, not only by rational calculation or isolated values, but also by invisible group dynamics and informal social cues (Granovetter, 1970, pp. 1421-1430).

At the same time, we can argue that the study's results build on Granovetter's and Hirschman's frameworks by illustrating the dual impact of social dynamics. For example, while peer normalization can reduce barriers to unethical behaviour (as in the Corporate Expenses Dilemma) and lead to moral disengagement, it can also promote collective voice and ethical resilience when trust, open communication, and a positive climate are present (Byun et al., 2025, p. 11).

When moving to the following concepts, such as *voice* and *loyalty*, we could observe that willingness to speak up or remain loyal among young professionals did not arise from simple compliance with peer norms but from the quality of their social environment. During interviews, our participants showed a willingness to stay in their organisations or raise concerns when they experienced mutual respect and high-quality team relationships. Thus, we argue that it directly reflects Hirschman's (1970) view of loyalty and voice, which were described as more emotional and even perceived as "special attachment" (p. 77) rather than as passive acceptance or blind resistance.

It is important to mention that at the same time, our findings illustrated the ambivalent nature of social influence: in some situations, collective normalization of ethically questionable actions led participants to develop ways to rationalize and justify unethical decisions, whereas in others, smaller teams with a trusting relationship enabled ethical dialogue and helped individuals maintain or even strengthen their standards.

In the first case, this observed collective normalization of ethically questionable actions illustrates how peer behaviour gradually lowers individual thresholds for misconduct, which is consistent with Granovetter's (1978) argument that participation in contentious or risky acts depends on how many others are already engaged. Such social dynamics also align with the notion of "suspension of morality", which describes how ambiguous climates and perceived organisational rules or demands may facilitate pragmatic justifications and selective disengagement from moral standards (Fida et al., 2025, pp. 962-963).

In the second case, young professionals show the opposite pattern: in smaller, trusting teams, peers were seen as a protective resource, creating space to talk through dilemmas. Such responses could preserve both personal (red lines) and collective values, once again highlighting recent evidence that coworker support and positive horizontal relationships can weaken the link between pressure and unethical behaviour (Byun et al., 2025, p. 12).

In light of this, one can argue that social group influence can function as both potential risk factors and protective resources, capable of pushing behaviour in both good and bad directions: normalizing questionable conduct or, conversely, enabling ethical dialogue and shared resistance to unethical behaviour.

What stands out is our result from our analysis of the *exit*. Unlike other decisions, which were shaped (to varying degrees) by social context and peer influence, the decision to leave an organisation was consistently seen and described as an individual act, rooted in private dissatisfaction rather than collective dynamics or peer thresholds.

In this context, young professionals mentioned management failures, lack of involvement, persistent disrespect, and a negative (toxic) culture as the main reasons for their exit.

Hence, it can be posited that *exit* functions primarily as a personal pathway and therefore supports and refines Hirschman's (1970, pp. 37-43) theoretical model. This finding may

challenge simplistic assumptions that, in this case, exit is always a last-resort reaction to failed voice or weakened loyalty, perceived through the lens of peer dynamics.

6.1 Responding to the Research Question

We consider it essential to devote a few more words explicitly to our research question and initial proposal, to draw connections between what was initially asked in the beginning of this Thesis, what was expected based on previous literature findings and theories, and what the empirical findings actually revealed.

This study set out to answer the following research question:

How does peer influence shape the moral decisions of young professionals in workplace dilemmas?

Generally, we can conclude that peer influence is a powerful yet context-dependent social mechanism. The influence of peer groups can definitely reshape individual ethical thresholds. When ethically ambiguous or questionable practices are widely practiced within a team and approved by colleagues, young professionals are more likely to engage in these behaviours themselves. In such situations, we could observe how initial “*red lines*” gradually soften as peer behaviour signals that the action is normal, acceptable, or not judged.

Moreover, such shifts in opinion often involve rational and situational justifications, as well as a (partial) lowering of moral standards. Justifications of unethical decisions were particularly noticeable in teams where organisational demands and norms implicitly reward such conduct. We find such findings consistent with research on moral disengagement in ambiguous or performance-driven contexts (Fida et al., 2024, pp. 964-965).

At the same time, we found an interesting opposite effect of social influence: our results demonstrated that peer influence can also strengthen ethical resilience and promote collective voice and resistance to unethical practices.

Finally, we found that peer influence operates unevenly across different response paths. *Loyalty* and *voice* are clearly shaped by the social climate within a team. The decision to leave the company, which was defined after Hirschman (1970) as exit, emerged as a primarily individual decision: we found that young professionals' decision to leave an organisation was a reaction to constant dissatisfaction with management, lack of development, or toxic culture, largely

irrespective of what their peers chose to do. Therefore, we argued that this nuance refines Hirschman's model by suggesting that, at least to a certain extent, early-career peer dynamics can navigate the path between adaptation, loyalty, and voice. At the same time, *exit* functions more as a personal boundary-setting act once individual limits are exceeded. However, we are aware of several limitations that hinder the generalizability of these results to a broader population.

All things considered, the study suggests that peer influence, when understood in combination with social pressure (at least to a certain extent), shapes moral decision-making by lowering ethical thresholds through normalization processes. At the same time, the social climate created by the same team members can foster moral resilience and voice.

This thesis, therefore, supports (but not fully) the central suggestion:

Peer influence affects young professionals' moral decision-making by lowering individual thresholds for engaging in peer-normative behaviour, which can lead to increased participation in ethically questionable actions or foster collective voice or exit responses.

With the expectation of *exit*, which in our context can be defined as a predominantly individual route.

6.2 Practical Implications

In this section, we highlight several ways in which organisations can apply the insights of this study.

First of all, our results show that workplace ethics questions should be treated as an essential component of successful team building and, in turn, of healthy team dynamics.

Thus, Management or HR teams could focus more on informal rules and traditions, rather than just standard codes of conduct. Such extended policies could include:

- Training supervisors and older colleagues to notice and address “small” violations early, without shaming or waiting for bigger escalations.
- Recognizing and rewarding informal acts of ethical courage and mutual help between team members.

- Using internal surveys or team assessments that explicitly measure perceived fairness, psychological safety, and moral disengagement cues.

Moreover, since exit appeared as an individual decision in our findings, HR and top management could implement the following practices:

- Treat repeated ethical concerns and unresolved (repeated) disrespect as early warning signals for potential turnover of an employee.
- Try to establish visible, credible ways to escalate (for example, beyond the direct supervisor).

This means young professionals can openly and confidently address ethical concerns or feelings of injustice without fearing retaliation, and as the following organisation can solve confidential ethics-related issues before people become disengaged or decide to leave.

6.3 Limitations and Future Directions

It is acknowledged that several limitations of this thesis should be considered.

First, our interviews were conducted with a limited number of young professionals, which is common in in-depth qualitative research but necessarily constrains the diversity of experiences and contexts captured (Mayring, 2014; Kallio et al., 2016).

Although we tried to reach a point where no new themes would appear in our sample, it remains possible that additional segments of young professional groups (in other industries, organisational sizes, or cultural settings) would reveal further variations in how peer influence shapes moral decision-making.

A further limitation concerns the recruitment of participants. Given the potentially sensitive nature of our main interview topics, such as ethics, difficult choices at work, peer dynamics, participants were primarily drawn from the existing network, rather than being recruited via anonymous, random procedures. Such an approach could have two opposing effects:

- On the one hand, existing trust might have made it easier for participants to speak openly about morally sensitive situations and to share concrete examples without fear or discomfort

- On the other hand, those young professionals who agreed to participate might be more reflective or ethically engaged because they were aware of my personal interest in ethics; they may (consciously or unconsciously) have framed their decisions in ways they believed would be viewed positively or as expected, rather than describing them in an entirely neutral manner.

Future research could build on these insights by using larger-scale surveys or mixed-methods designs to test the prevalence and relative strength of the mechanisms identified here (e.g., threshold shifts, normalization, protective peer atmosphere) across broader populations of early-career employees.

7. Conclusion

This Master's thesis aimed to bring us closer to an answer to how peer influence shapes the moral decisions of young professionals. We introduced different moral dilemmas to elicit deeper argumentation and answers not only to "if the participants would do it," but also to "why they would do it or why not."

This study illustrates that ethical decision-making in the workplace arises from the interplay among personal values, team dynamics, and established organisational rules. In other words, when young professionals face a morally complex situation at work, they are not driven solely by one single factor.

The interviews were constructed around corporate scenarios and built on Hirschman's (1970) Exit–Voice–Loyalty framework and Granovetter's Threshold Theory (1978). By using these two theories, we aimed to cover both questions: "what" participants would do and "why" they would do it. This reveals the subtle social mechanisms through which young professionals' moral boundaries and values are challenged, adjusted, or defended during the early career corporate phase.

A central contribution of the thesis was to illustrate how peer influence operates as a shifting mechanism in morally ambiguous and challenging situations for young professionals. We could particularly observe it when participants began interviews by mentioning clear personal "red lines," and later indicated that they might cross these boundaries if ethically questionable practices were widely normalized by others.

What is considered equally essential in our views is that the study demonstrates the necessity of peer and social context influences and their erosion of ethical standards. Social dynamics also played a positive role, especially in trusting teams with an open communication style.

In such environments, we found that peers are described as sources of moral support and can help participants talk through dilemmas and search for compromise solutions.

Moreover, the study illustrates the value and limitations of the interview method with a small number of participants. We argue that the purposeful selection of participants, in this case six young professionals in competitive sectors, enabled rich, detailed responses. Without a doubt, our group of participants was demographically and contextually specific, mainly drawn from the researcher's extended network.

These limitations, however, may point toward future research directions. We suggest larger-scale studies to examine how frequently the mechanisms identified in this thesis (threshold shifts, normalization processes, etc.) occur across different industries, cultures, and career stages.

In addition to the previously discussed contributions, our findings suggest concrete directions and tools for organisations that could help build a safe, productive, and ethical work environment.

Among possible practices for building safe, trusting teams, we suggest regular reflection meetings, support and encouragement for speaking up, and recognition of informal ethical support behaviour. At the same time, the independent and individualistic nature of exit supported the importance of early attention to signs of dissatisfaction, disrespect, and misalignment within a team. We find it essential to recognize how social and individual factors interact and aim to provide a more accurate understanding of ethical life within organisations.

If we explore this in greater depth, our findings remind us that fostering an ethical environment is essential not only for the healthy growth of individuals and organisations but also for the well-being of a society that depends on fairness, trust, and integrity.

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Statement on the Use of Digital Tools:

To support linguistic accuracy and clarity, the Grammarly was used for grammar, spelling, and typographical corrections.

APPENDIX A: Interview Guide

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this interview. I greatly appreciate your willingness to share your professional experiences. To begin, I would like to hear a brief overview of your current role and responsibilities.

During this interview, I will present several workplace scenarios and ask for your thoughts on potential career decisions. Please note that there are no right or wrong answers; I am primarily interested in your perspective and the reasoning behind your responses.

Entrance Questions (warm up):

What is your current role and position within your organisation? Please tell me a little about what exactly you are doing.

Would you like to grow further in your career?

When you think about advancing in your career, what factors do you consider most important?

What does career success mean to you personally?

How would you describe your relationships with your immediate colleagues? Are you pretty close, or more just working relationships?

Core Career Dilemma Scenarios and Peer Influence:

Scenario 1: Promotion Opportunity

Your manager approaches you about a senior position that just opened up. The role comes with a 30% salary increase and would mean a big career step. However, your first major project would be leading the restructuring that eliminates many positions to cut costs. Most of your colleagues are aware of this restructuring plan.

Follow-ups:

Which factors would you consider before accepting or rejecting this offer?

How important would peer support or disapproval be in your choice?

Scenario 2: Observing Workplace Discrimination

During team meetings, your supervisor repeatedly interrupts and dismisses ideas from two female colleagues while engaging positively with male team members. This happens regularly. You notice most people look uncomfortable, but no one says anything during meetings or afterward.

However, last week, someone from another department spoke up in their team meeting about similar behavior, and you heard that two others supported them afterward.

What would you do? Would your peers' silence or support affect your decision?"

Scenario 3: Industry Career Move

You receive a job offer from a tobacco company offering a high position with a salary increase and excellent benefits. When you mentioned this opportunity to your close colleagues, you discovered that most of them have strong negative opinions about working for tobacco companies. You also know that three other people from your professional network have recently turned down similar offers from companies in controversial industries. However, you've heard that two colleagues from your business school are now working for tobacco and gambling companies, respectively.

Follow-up: Walk me through how you would approach this decision.

Scenario 4: Corporate expenses

You discover that few colleagues in your department submit personal expenses, like lunches and ride-shares, as business costs. They mention that 'it's pretty common' and that it is difficult to check. Imagine they suggest you start doing it this way, too?

Follow-up (if they say no): "What if this practice became completely normalized and everyone on your 12-person team was doing it? Would your answer change?"

Follow-up (if they say yes initially): “What if only those three people were doing it and the rest of the team clearly disapproved? Would that affect your choice?”

Scenario 5: Company Changes

Your company has introduced new policies that you personally disagree with - perhaps cutting employee benefits, increasing workload expectations, or changing practices in ways that don't align with your values. The changes aren't illegal, just different from what originally attracted you to work here. You've been with the company for 2+ years and built good relationships with your team.

First Follow-up: How would you approach this situation if none of your colleagues were planning to leave?

Second Follow-up: What if you discovered that several close colleagues were actively job searching and encouraging others to 'start looking around too'? Would that change your approach?

General questions:

What comes to mind when you hear the term 'ethical work environment'?

Does having the support or disagreement of colleagues make it easier or harder for you to act?

What keeps you committed to an organisation even when you disagree with some of its practices or decisions? (Do you have personal red lines?)

Appendix B: Transcripts

Interview 1

1. 27 Min

2. Transcript

3. 06.10.25 09:25

4. I: [0:00:13.5] Okay, so, XXX, thank you very much for your time to participate in my research. I really appreciate that you took time in the middle of a week. I don't take it for granted.

5. [0:00:16.1] P1: Oh, you're welcome.

6. [0:00:32.0] I: I will be asking today about various workplace scenarios and your thoughts on career decisions. As I already mentioned, there are no right or wrong answers, so don't worry about that just say what you think, that's all.

7. [0:00:52.4] The structured interview is as follows: we will start with a few introductory questions, then we will have five hypothetical scenarios where you will need to make some decisions and tell me about your decision-making process. We will end with few general questions. So, to summarize, it will take around 30 minutes. Is that okay for you?

8. [0:01:14.3] P1: Yep, perfect.

9. [0:01:16.1] I: Okay, so let's start then. Maybe tell me a little bit about your current role and position within your organisation.

10. [0:01:29.3] P1: Okay, so first and foremost, my name is XXX. I'm 32 years old, and I currently work as a process engineer for a German group that is mostly involved in the oil and gas industry.

11. So, my role is that of a project engineer, as it's called. We build new plants we do greenfield projects, and we also do brownfield projects, where we work on existing plants in chemical

engineering or in oil and gas, trying to make them safer, for example. My part in that is mostly doing the calculations and drawings for the operations so that things can be built. That's mainly my role as a process engineer.

12. [0:02:23.7] I: Very complicated and admirable.

13. [0:02:28.4] P1: It's a very technical field, yeah.

14. [0:02:31.5] I: Yeah, nothing else to add, very cool. The next question is, would you like to grow further in your career?

15. I suppose there's also a possibility for you to become a senior, maybe, or something like that. Do you have such ambitions?

16. [0:02:48.2] P1: Yeah, absolutely. So, my main ambition at the moment is to become a senior or lead engineer. In our project organisation, there's always a senior or lead engineer that's the person with the experience who makes the decisions.

17. And that person signs the documents that go to the customer. Currently, I'm in between I still need someone to sign and approve my documents as a senior. So, I strive to become a senior or lead engineer within the next two years.

18. [0:03:31.9] I: Well, that's pretty clear career path. Yeah, I hope it will work out. I mean, I'm sure it will work out.

19. Okay. And when you think about advancing your career, right, which factors do you consider? What is important for you when you think about this advancement? The team or whatever it might be?

20. [0:03:53.4] P1: My role is very interdisciplinary. In plant or chemical plant engineering, I'm the first one to create the concept for how everything works. It's assumed that I have knowledge of all the other disciplines, we have measurement and control, piping, rotating machines, and equipment, and I need to know enough about each of these fields to do my job properly.

21. So, to grow further, I need to get better at process engineering itself. But it's also like when a tennis pro learns we can't just focus on one skill. I need to learn the other disciplines as well because this helps me grow in my role and perform better.
22. [0:04:47.5] I: Okay. Very interesting point. Thank you. I mean, I didn't know it, so I also learned something from you today.
23. [0:04:59.2] When thinking about general career success, what does it mean to you personally? Because for every individual, it can mean different things.
24. [0:05:08.9] P1: Yeah, success in my current role is measured by customer satisfaction and the customer is satisfied when the plant gets commissioned, when everything starts up and works as guaranteed by the contract, and when everything is completed at the right time and for the right cost. So, it's basically the classic quality definitions of success.
25. So, success for me means that I provide a service my customer doesn't have in-house. As a process engineer, I get hired when they need consulting in this field. So, success means, first of all, being able to provide this service without needing any assistance. It also means that when I deliver this service and the customer comes back, that's a sign of success.
26. I see this happening at the moment, I get some studies where I have to do calculations, small packages, and when the customer is satisfied, we get the full project, we get the engineering work, and that's where the real value lies right now.
27. [0:06:23.1] I: Okay. And so you said that your process engineer, if I'm not mistaken. Okay.
28. Do you have a team? Do you have some colleagues? And if yes, are you close with them? Do you have a good relationship with them? Maybe you could describe a bit of the dynamic between you and them.
29. [0:06:43.9] P1: In the process chapter of our company, we have about four process engineers at the location where I currently work, but around 100 in total across the whole group. So, I'm connected with colleagues from all around Germany and the Netherlands. I would describe my relationship

with them as very connected, because I'm actually the newest person in that division, and I also seek knowledge and guidance from them.

30. So, it's like I've got a big group of mentors, because there's so much to learn in this field, and it's so vast that you really need those people to help you succeed.

31. [0:07:30.3] I: Yeah, fair enough interesting point, I understand. Okay, so those were my introductory questions, and I would suggest we move on to our scenarios now.

32. The first scenario is about promotion opportunities, which you mentioned are important for you as they are for many people.

33. So, let's imagine the following: your manager approaches you about a senior position, which is very relevant for you, that has just opened up. The role comes with a substantial salary increase, of course, along with benefits, and it would represent a big career step for you. However, your first major project would involve leading a restructuring that would eliminate quite a few positions to cut costs. Most of your colleagues are also aware of this restructuring plan.

34. [0:08:33.3] P1: Oh, so I will get the senior role, but the first task I have to do is to fire people, actually.

35. [0:08:39.8] I: Well, yeah, not directly, but...

36. [0:08:46.8] P1: But okay, it sounds like decreasing the headcount is one of the tasks I would have to do. So the question is whether I would accept the role or decline it, and what thought process I would have behind that decision.

37. [0:09:01.0] Okay, so I think the first question I would ask is whether it's possible to go without layoffs if my role could provide enough optimization in our tasks or processes so that layoffs could be avoided.

38. But if, if it's necessary to cut people, then I guess I would do the role as well. Because if I want to do it, someone else will do it. So yeah.

39. I: Good point, okay.

40. [0:09:44.8] That's actually a kind of moral dilemma, because I've never had to let people go, and I think I would really hate that since I'm very close to my colleagues.

41. [0:09:49.9] I: Yeah, okay and let's see, how important would your colleagues' support or disapproval be in your choice? Would it play any role?

42. [0:10:03.0] P1: In my current position, since I'm on the same line of the organisation as I am at the moment, if I were to stay on this level or hierarchy step, I would need strong approval from my colleagues. I work closely with them on projects we usually have teams of five to six people from different fields, so we really need to function well together as a unit.

43. So, it's very important that we don't necessarily have to love each other, but we at least need to tolerate each other. And if someone in the team is creating problems for the rest, then we need to address that, even if it means letting that person go.

44. [0:10:50.3] I: Okay. Well, good point. Okay. Thank you very much.

45. Then let's move to the next scenario, which is about workplace discrimination.

46. I don't know how it is in technical fields, but maybe you can elaborate a little bit more about it. So, let's imagine that during some team meetings, your supervisor repeatedly interrupts and dismisses ideas from two female colleagues, while engaging positively with male team members. This happens regularly. You notice that most people are already starting to look uncomfortable, but no one says anything during or after the meetings.

47. What would you do?

48. [0:11:40.8] P1: Either I would address him directly one-on-one if it's that obvious that he's clearly showing misogynistic behaviour, or I would go to my team lead. In our structure, if there's a problem like that, it's better to address it in person first. And if that doesn't work, you go one step up the hierarchy, that would be the team lead of the process engineers, and he would then discuss it

with him or with his own supervisor. We have a zero-discrimination policy, so that kind of behaviour simply wouldn't be acceptable.

49. [0:12:21.7] I: Okay, so it wouldn't be a difficult decision for you, even if nobody else speaks up? You would take the role of being the first person to do so?

50. [0:12:29.2] P1: It's very hard to be the superhero in the moment, because I often find that after a meeting, when someone was rude or something like that happened, I start to process it and think about it afterward. But if I didn't address it, I would feel distressed about it later.

51. So I would go to my team lead possibly. Or if it is if that guy is on our location, I would address it personally.

52. [0:13:06.5] I: Okay, then just one last short question on that topic. Let's say several of your close colleagues speak up about the issue quite openly, would that make it easier for you to join them?

53. [0:13:16.3] P1: Yeah, definitely. If the whole environment and culture are more open about addressing things like that, it becomes much easier to talk about the elephant in the room, I would say.

54. [0:13:27.1] I: Yeah, okay. Very interesting. Thank you.

55. And then we're moving to the next scenario, which is also about career advancement, but this time from the angle of changing industries. So, you're now working in oil and gas, right? Let's imagine you receive a job offer from a company in an industry that many people consider not very ethical, for example, tobacco or firearms, something like that.

56. Yeah, something like that, either tobacco or military equipment, for example, something along those lines.

57. [0:14:17.3] So, this job offer would give you a high position, with a salary increase and very good benefits. However, when you mention this opportunity to your colleagues, you discover that most

of them have strong negative opinions about working in such an industry. Can you walk me through how you would approach that situation?

58. [0:14:40.6] P1: Okay, I think it always depends on how good the offer is. If it's only a small increase in my current compensation, I would probably decline it.

59. But if it's a big offer a significant increase in benefits and compensation, I would probably go for it. Because at the moment, I work in the oil and gas field, which is also somewhat unethical and not so well-regarded. I actually work for a plant engineering company, and while this company mostly operates in oil and gas, we also work on renewables like hydrogen, as we're trying to transform and move toward cleaner solutions.

60. But if it's for the military, I would probably go for it, because even defending countries need weapons to defend themselves. I would tell myself that, and since it's such a large compensation jump, I would probably accept it.

61. [0:15:54.0] I: Okay, great, thank you very much. The next one is about corporate expenses.

62. So, let's imagine again that you discover a few of your colleagues in your department submit personal expenses, for example, restaurant lunches or taxi rides as business costs. They're using them in their private lives but submitting them as business expenses. They mention that it's pretty common and difficult to check. Now imagine they suggest you start doing the same. Would you join?

63. [0:16:30.7] P1: I actually have a very similar real-life example. I had a talk with my colleague about a week ago before we went on a business trip to our customer. He extended the trip by around two hours, and we get paid extra bonuses for such trips. During that time, we took a longer break and had lunch with the customer. I told my colleague that I would book that time as a break, because for me, that wasn't working time

64. I told him that if he wanted to record it differently, he could, nobody would probably find out, but I think that's not the ethical way to do it. I wouldn't risk my integrity for something like 10 or 20 euros.

65. So I won't join this scheme.

66. [0:17:47.3] I: Okay, so it's pretty strong opinion.

67. What if, let's say, that becomes completely normalized, right? So not only a few of your colleagues, but generally everyone does it. Just to mention, it's not official, you don't get any paper or email about it, but it becomes normalized. Would your answer change, or would you still prefer to be the only one who doesn't do it?

68. [0:18:22.8] P1: Oh, that's difficult to say, because if it's common practice in the workplace, I would probably do it as well, since it's like, from the small corporate employee to the big boss, everyone does it.

69. It's probably included in the business plan, I guess.

70. I think the honest answer would be that I would do it as well, because if it's normalized, then it just becomes part of how things are done.

71. Difficult.

72. Probably I'll do it.

73. I: [0:18:56.6] Okay. Well, thank you very much.

74. We have just the last scenario for today.

75. Let's imagine again that your company has introduced new policies that you personally disagree with. It could be related to employee benefits, workload, or just general management changes, you know, when the whole atmosphere and environment start to shift and no longer align with your personal values or what's important to you.

76. You've been in the company for a couple of years and already have well-established relationships with your team.

77. The question is: how would you approach that situation, considering that none of your colleagues are planning to leave and they've just accepted things the way they are?

78. [0:19:45.4] P1: Oh, that's hard, it really depends on what kind of policy it is. I actually have an example. There was a policy change where some people were excluded from certain meetings to supposedly make things more efficient and save everyone's time. But in retrospect, it turned out to be the exact opposite. They tried to be more effective by cutting people from the meetings, but in reality, we ended up needing more time to get everyone else on board and up to date.

79. So, I then wrote to the project lead and my team lead, explaining that this approach was ineffective and actually cost us much more money to do it that way. If I believe a policy is bad and will ultimately cost more than it saves, I would and in that case, I did write a very long email to the whole company at that location, saying that this is wrong and that we shouldn't, or mustn't, do it like that.

80. Yeah, that's also an example I did.

81. [0:21:22.8] I: So, if I understood correctly, you would try to approach the situation and change something rather than leave is that right? Okay, fair enough, understandable.

82. Well, that was all for my scenarios. I just have a few short questions left to wrap things up. When we talk about an ethical environment, when you imagine the phrase ethical work environment, how would you define it? What does it mean to you personally?

83. [0:21:57.2] P1: An ethical environment for me is a workplace where no one is discriminated against, not for sexuality, not for race. We have a very mixed workplace with people from all around Europe, from different genders and cultures. So, when we can work together on that basis as a team, where no one is excluded, that's what I would consider an ethical or inclusive workplace.

84. [0:22:40.2] I: Okay. Yeah, sounds very nice and idealistic.

85. So, if you noticed, during my scenario descriptions, I mentioned the dynamics with your colleagues a few times. Generally speaking, does having the support or disagreement of your colleagues make it easier or harder for you to act or make certain decisions?

86. [0:23:10.1] P1: I really want my colleagues to agree or disagree with me, because if there's blind agreement all the time, it shows that people don't really care. What I actually value is when we can have arguments or discussions but still maintain mutual respect. That's the kind of environment I want.

87. I think it's way easier with colleagues who agree with you, but I also don't like it if they agree all the time, because when they always agree, they probably don't care. It's like asking someone how they are, and they always say "I'm good," even when things aren't. That's not honest.

88. [0:23:53.8] I: very interesting point. It's probably first time I hear it in the interview. So I will have to think about it. Thank you for that.

89. So, I have one last question for today. When we talk about commitment to an organisation, what keeps you committed, even when you disagree with some of its practices? Of course, there are no perfect companies, we all understand that. But do you have some personal red lines where you would say, "Okay, at this point, I'm out"?

90. [0:24:28.1] P1: Oh, I've worked in a very toxic environment before. So, if people are screaming, or if others are made scapegoats for decisions they weren't even involved in, that would definitely be a red line for me.

91. And when no one, especially from the senior members or leads, takes responsibility, that's a big problem for me. I think the worst thing I saw in my last company, or even the two before that, was that decisions were made at the top management level, but the responsibility was pushed down to the lowest members of the hierarchy. Those were the people who had to do the work, often without the necessary information or support. And when things went wrong, they were the ones who had to leave -not the people who were actually paid to take that level of responsibility. That situation reminds me a lot of my previous company as well.

92. Yeah, so unfortunately, when you have leads or leading people or seniors who don't take the responsibility for their team members, that's, that's one of my bigger red flags.

93. [0:26:15.6] I: Okay. Well, yeah, I probably couldn't agree more on that one. Well, that was actually pretty much all my questions.

94. Thank you very much for your very interesting and really out-of-the-box answers. I'll need to think about them once more. I really appreciate your time and the fact that you spontaneously decided to participate. It was very interesting , thank you once again.

95. [0:26:44.2] It was also interesting for me. Thanks a lot.

96. P1: Bye.

Interview 2

1. 23 Min

2. 09.10.25 20:39

3. Transcript

4. [0:00:10.3] I: So, hello, XXX. Thank you very much one more time for taking your time to participate in my research today. I really appreciate you sharing your professional experience and that you found time in the middle of a week. Really, really thank you for that.

5. [0:00:22.7] P2: Yes, of course.

6. [0:00:25.0] I: I will ask you today a few questions about professional work environment. I would like to know a little bit about your professional journey, about your goals, dreams, and opinions on a few specific topics.

7. [0:00:40.9] So, the interview will consist of a few entrance questions, just to get to know you a bit better, and also five career scenarios, hypothetical situations. I will just be interested in your way of thinking and how you would make decisions in a certain situation. We will end up with just a

general question; it will take around two minutes. So, that's it. Nothing is complicated. As mentioned before, there are no wrong or correct answers, just the way you think. That's the only thing that is important today.

8. Then, let's start. What is your current role, first of all, a position within your organisation? Just tell me about what you are doing day to day.

9. [0:01:39.2] P2: Yes, the current position. Okay.

10. Yes, I'm working for XXX and I am an e-learning coordinator. So, I am responsible for all the digital transformation, knowledge transformation. Like, we have e-learning, of course, but also like e-libraries or e-learning content from external partners. And I'm responsible for, how to say, putting it on the learning management system and providing it for our learners.

11. [0:02:40.9] I: Very interesting I have to say. I didn't know that you're actually working at XXX.

12. Okay, and the next question is: would you like to grow further in your career? So, do you have such plans?

13. [0:03:03.4] P2: Hmm. So, like to climb the professional ladder. Okay. No, currently not. So, I'm really happy with my job currently.

14. I think a leader position is, for now, a little bit too much responsibility for me. But maybe in the future, it's okay. But currently, I have so much work and so much to do. So that would be too much now.

15. [0:03:41.4] I: And okay, I understand. And when we think about career success—for every person, each person, it's a different thing.

16. Could you define it for you? Like, what is it for you to be professionally successful?

17. [0:03:58.0] P2: Um, well, to know what I have to know about my, um, my world, my business world. Um, I'm researching a lot and I want to be up to date, like the trends for digital learning.

18. [0:04:23.2] I: Yeah, that's super fun. Actually, I agree. I understand what you mean.

19. [0:04:31.9] P2: And yeah, I want to do a good job. I'm really closely working with other co-workers. I want to provide a good e-learning, like I'm a content provider.

20. So yes, the other workers or colleagues, they send me their information, what they want to learn or do an e-learning about. And I'm working with it, so I'm building the course.

21. [0:05:27.8] I: Wow. Okay. That sounds like a lot of responsibility. Yeah.

22. Okay. Very interesting. You mentioned co-workers. It's quite an important aspect of our interview too. So, how would you describe your relationship with your colleagues? Is it important for you to be in a dynamic team?

23. [0:05:54.3] P2: Oh, yes. I think the colleagues and the work environment are the most important for me personally, because I am naturally a team player, I would say. And yeah, I like to communicate with them

24. I like to share ideas and maybe some problems. And yeah, so I also want to talk about some personal stuff, because when it's just professional, it's like a little bit, yeah, cold, cold.

25. [0:06:41.1] I: Okay, so that was my entrance questions. And now, if you don't mind, we will go to one scenario, which is one more time, it's hypothetical; it shouldn't be like that you experienced it in the past.

26. Okay, so it's about a promotion opportunity. I know that for you right now, it's not super relevant, but maybe it was relevant in the past since it's not your first job.

27. [0:07:22.1] Yes. Yeah. Okay, so let's imagine your manager approaches you about a senior position that just opened up. And this role comes with a substantial salary increase and would mean a big career step for you. And let's imagine you actually want it, because in your case it's not. Okay. However, your first major project would be leading a restructuring that unfortunately will eliminate a lot of positions. Okay. Yeah, so a lot of your colleagues, few of your colleagues will unfortunately

lose their job. So which factors would you consider before accepting or rejecting this offer? Can you just walk me through your thinking process?

28. [0:08:04.4] P2: Phew. So I really want the job.

29. For me, it's a little bit a difficult question because right now I had to choose a colleague for me. So I was like in the process of hiring. Yes, hiring process. So I did the interviews and so on and for me, it was very, very difficult to choose one and I had to choose one. But that meant that I had to reject the other participants, yes. So really the thought of firing some colleagues I really like, that's really heavy for me.

30. [0:09:11.5] So I think when I have to do this, when that is my job and I get paid for it, I would, yeah, make sure or would communicate with my colleagues and maybe would help to find another position or something like that. It depends how many colleagues I have to fire, but yeah, I'm really on the soft side.

31. [0:09:55.0] I: And let's say if, I mean, you wouldn't probably fire yourself, just the scope of your new projects will be so, let's say, automated, that a few people will have to leave, unfortunately. But imagine that your close colleagues, right, with work, they will not be, like, touched.

32. [0:10:31.7] Yeah. And you get support from them, like approval that it's okay, like they cheer you up. Would you in that case change your approach?

33. [0:10:38.6] P2: I probably would like to fire the other colleagues I'm not close to. Yes, maybe there are some reasons also, so maybe we can see, okay, the colleagues didn't do a good job, or there are reasons, so reasons to really fire them. Then, yes, my process would be another one, but only to fire some just to fire them or to raise the statistics, I don't know, it's hard, yeah.

34. [0:11:36.0] Okay, I understand. Yeah, probably would be hard for a lot of people.

35. I: Okay, so the next scenario is about discrimination in the workplace, which is unfortunately not rare nowadays. So let's imagine during team meetings, your supervisor or director, whatever, repeatedly interrupts and dismisses ideas from two female colleagues while, or like male colleagues,

it doesn't matter, while engaging positively with, let's say in this case, male team members. And this occurs regularly. And you notice that a lot of people in the meetings look uncomfortable, but no one says anything during meetings or afterwards. So what would you do?

36. [0:12:22.4] P2: I would stand up for them. If I would notice that behaviour, I would say something, not maybe like direct, just, I don't know.

37. Okay, sure. Yeah, sorry. So, yeah, not directly, but I would say, hey, I think that person had a good idea. Let's catch up with it, or something like that.

38. [0:13:20.1] I: Okay, and let's imagine if your colleagues actually you notice that they also start this chain reaction, right? They start to speak up. Would it make the situation easier for you to follow their behaviour? Would it make it easier for you?

39. [0:13:27.1] P2: Yes, okay, it would.

40. [0:13:32.3] I: Then we are moving to the next one, which is also about career advancement, just about different industries. So you said that you're working for XXX. I suppose it's semi-government, right?

41. Probably, yes, it's yeah, fully maybe even, okay, so it's definitely connected to public sector. Yeah, okay, so let's imagine you receive another job offer, because you're so talented. In this case, from a tobacco company offering a high position with excellent benefits. However, when you mention this opportunity to your colleagues at your current place, you discover that most of them have very strong negative opinions about working for such industries like tobacco, alcohol, such things. So walk me through how you would approach such a decision?

42. [0:14:34.0] P2: Okay. Yeah, I would talk to them. I would ask what the problem would be and what specific reasons they have that they dislike it that much.

43. In my current position, it would be like I would do e-learning. It's like knowledge transformations. I probably wouldn't agree with them because I'm not the one who would make others sick for some reason. So I think for me it's something else.

44. [0:15:27.8] I: Okay, fair enough. Then we are moving to the next one, which is about corporate expenses.

45. . So, you discover in theory that a few of your colleagues in your department submit personal expenses like lunches in restaurants or taxi drives as business costs, as private life expenses listed as business costs. They mentioned that it's pretty common and it is also important to mention that it's difficult to check it up and nobody really does it. And let's imagine they suggest you also start doing it this way. So what would be your decision?

46. [0:16:12.2] P2: Very difficult because I know much about compliance. And yeah, it's, I would avoid it. I think so. Yeah, I don't want to get in trouble

47. I guess I'm a very correct person. And yeah, I wouldn't take such precedence. And so, yeah.

48. [0:16:50.8] I: And if this practice, let's say, becomes completely normalized, not listed as a benefit officially, but just generally normalized within your department, and let's say your team is just casually doing it, would your answer change?

49. [0:17:17.4] P2: now, I would say I would stay. But I know social development, and when it becomes completely normal, maybe I would lose my strictness, I don't know. Yeah, but I would also talk to some other people that are not in the company.

50. [0:17:43.7] I: Okay. Okay. Interesting point. Well, then we have just the last scenario.

51. Well, then we have just the last scenario. Let's imagine that your current company has introduced new policies that you personally disagree with for various reasons, right? So it would be like cutting employee benefits, increasing workload, just overall changing the climate or practices, and you just feel it doesn't align with your values, right? With your personal values. So nothing illegal, nothing crazy, but just it's not what you expected in the first place. And you've been with the company

already for a couple of years and have a good relationship with your team. How would you approach the situation if considering that none of your colleagues were planning to leave and everybody just accepts the way it is?

52. [0:18:39.9] P2: Um, yeah, it's like when you have such strong policies or behavioural, some management change, you know, like, yes, it's really a big change.

53. Really, really big changes also affect the environment and the work situation. And for me, it's important if the other colleagues don't want to leave, but if I don't feel safe or I feel disrespected or I don't feel good anymore, I would consider leaving the company.

54. I: Okay. Yeah. I understand. Well, thank you very much. That was pretty much all my scenarios

55. [0:19:40.0] I just have a few general questions left. When you hear the term 'ethical work environment,' how would you define it for yourself? What is it for you?

56. [0:19:52.8] P2: Ethical work environment. There are a lot of topics with it. You have all the feminism and gender topics. It's like diversity and inclusion topics. And also, for me, the compliance topic.

57. [0:20:34.2] I: Yeah, that sounds amazing. Yeah, as we talked about different scenarios now, and constantly, if you noticed, you mentioned some colleagues, like team dynamics.

58. [0:20:56.3] So, generally speaking, does having the support or disagreement of your close colleagues make it easier or harder for you to act or to make some decisions, generally speaking?

59. [0:21:12.1] P2: Yes, I mean, they're close colleagues for a reason, so their opinion matter.

60. That's no lie, but yeah, the dynamic for the environment and surroundings are also important and it's hard for me when they disagree. It is better or something else when they agree with my position.

61. [0:21:49.7] I: Okay. And, um, when we talk about staying in the company, right? Like in the last scenario, what generally keeps you committed to an organisation? Even when you disagree with some of the practices, do you have personal red lines when you say, okay, I'm out?

62. [0:22:09.7] P2: Mm hmm. Oh, difficult.

63. For me, I leave when I go to my team lead and say, okay, I've noticed some points that need to change, or I don't agree with them, and they don't take it seriously. Nothing changes over some period.

64. So, I don't think a company is perfect, the perfect company doesn't exist but if the opinions and struggles of the people don't matter and nothing changes, that's something for me. Yeah, then I leave after some time when I notice nothing changes.

65. [0:23:16.0] I: Okay. Thank you very much. Those were all my questions. I hope I didn't steal a lot of your time.

66. It was really interesting and valuable answers. I'm looking forward to use the code for my research paper. Thank you very much for your time.

Interview 3

1. 21 Min

2. 09.10.25 19:00

3. Transcript

4. I: [0:00:05.1] Okay. Hello XXX.

5. P3:Hi.

6. [0:00:12.3] Thank you so much for taking the time to participate in my research. I really appreciate it. I know you're super busy, and it's Monday evening.
7. [0:00:25.5] Just for the short record, I'd probably start with a brief introduction about the structure of the interview. We'll have a few short introductory questions, just to understand what you're doing and the scope of your role. Then I'll present you with five short scenarios where I'd like to hear your opinion about certain situations. It's important to mention that there are no right or wrong answers, you can answer based on how you feel and be completely honest. It's completely anonymous, and this recording will not be used anywhere outside of my study. I hope you're fine with that.
8. [0:01:07.5] P3: Yes, I'm fine with that, thank you.
9. [0:01:11.0] I: So, let's start with just a few short introductory questions. Maybe you could tell me a little bit about your role, what your current position is and where you're working right now.
10. [0:01:23.9] P3: Sure. So I work at Samsung in the role of marketing, retail marketing specialist.
11. So my job is to talk with partners, for example, MediaMarkt and make sure that our furniture and displays for Samsung products are done correctly within the guidelines, as well as to drive sales through our POS materials.
12. [0:01:54.4] I: Okay. Well, sounds very interesting and quite unusual position. Very cool.
13. [0:02:01.5] So, the next question is: would you like to grow further in your career in general? Maybe not necessarily in your current company, but is professional growth important to you?
14. P3: [0:02:10.3] Yes, I would say so, because we live in a world where inflation keeps rising. So I feel like it's essential to keep growing in your position, not just from the perspective of personal and professional development, but also financially. I know it sounds pragmatic, but it's just the reality of the world we live in.

15. So yeah, of course, I'd like to keep going and the field that I'm working in marketing really aligns with my personality and with my goals in life as well. But yeah, I for sure would like to pursue my career.
16. [0:02:47.8] I: Okay, and when you think about advancing in your career, are there any factors you consider most important? What matters the most to you, for example, speed, money, position, or maybe the team?
17. [0:03:04.6] P3: I think for me, the most important part is the people I work with and how comfortable I feel in my workplace. I would find it very hard to work with people I can't converse with or just have friendly conversations with. I know a lot of people say, "Yeah, my job is just a job, and my private time is separate," but for me, it's important to have a good relationship with my colleagues. Otherwise, I feel like it would cause me anxiety if I didn't like my workplace.
18. [0:03:46.4] I: I totally understand. It was actually my next question.
19. How important is your relationship with your colleagues, and what kind of relationship do you have in your current position? Do you and your team understand each other well?
20. [0:04:01.3] P3: Yes. So I find the relationship with team very important.
21. At the workplaces I've been in before, I still keep in contact with my old colleagues from various places. As for my current workplace, it hasn't been that long, I've been working there for about two months now, but I'm trying to establish good relationships. So far, everyone has been very welcoming and nice, which I find very important.
22. [0:04:33.0] I: Okay. Well, that sounds like a good work for this, especially for you. Yeah. Okay. Thank you very much.
23. So, I would suggest we move on to our first scenario, which is about a promotion opportunity, something that, as you said, is relevant for most of us, especially considering the current economic situation in the world.

24. [0:04:56.7] So, let's imagine your manager approaches you about a senior position that has just opened up. The role comes with a substantial salary increase and would represent a big career step for you. However, your first major project would involve leading a restructuring that would eliminate many of your current colleagues, meaning you would have to make the decision to let them go. Most of your colleagues already know about this restructuring plan.
25. So, the question is: which factors would you consider before accepting or rejecting this offer?
26. [0:05:39.3] P3: No, that's so hard. Yeah. Okay. Let me think for one moment.
27. So, I get this job opportunity, and because I take this position, some of my colleagues will be let go yeah. But if someone else takes that position, the same thing would happen, right?
28. I: True. They will need to make this decision, yeah.
29. P3: [0:06:12.1] Then it's inevitable. That's life. I'm taking the promotion, I'm sorry.
30. I: Thank you.
31. P3: No, but like, let me explain. Let me explain so I don't sound like a bad person.
32. [0:06:27.3] I: We don't make any judgments or anything like that, it's totally fine. I mean, work is work.
33. [0:06:34.1] P3: Yes, but no, I'm looking at this from the perspective that this position will inevitably be filled, and some people will inevitably be let go in this scenario.
34. So, if I don't take this position, I'm also part of the pool of people who could be let go, right?
35. Yeah, I think it would be harder for me if I declined the position and they didn't fill it, if everything just stayed the same. I think that would be a more difficult situation to deal with.
36. I: [0:07:05.4] Okay, so would you say that your colleagues' opinions would influence your decision? Since, in a way, you wouldn't want to carry that kind of responsibility, right?

37. P3: I, you know, I, you mean, so would I consider their feelings?

38. Yeah, yes, of course. Honestly, inside I would probably feel very guilty and sad.

39. And I would try to talk to them and apologize. I know our relationship would probably be affected or even end, but yeah, I would feel really bad about it.

40. [0:07:47.8] I: Okay. Thank you very much.

41. Then let's move on to the next scenario, which will cover a situation that is, unfortunately, quite common in many workplaces-discrimination.

42. [0:08:06.9] So, imagine that during team meetings, your supervisor or boss repeatedly interrupts and dismisses ideas from two of your colleagues, while engaging positively with others. For example, they are constantly dismissive or disrespectful toward male colleagues, but the complete opposite, very positive, with female colleagues.

43. [0:08:34.4] And this happens regularly. You notice that most people look uncomfortable, but no one says anything during the meetings or afterward. So, what would you do? How would you approach that situation? Would you speak up, even if no one else did?

44. [0:08:54.8] P3: I don't think I would speak up in front of everyone because I feel like it's also disrespectful in a way.

45. I think I would try to politely talk to the person who's being disrespectful to the other colleagues and try to find out why. Not in a confrontational way, like, I wouldn't go up to them and say, "Oh, why do you hate men?", but rather try to understand what's behind their behaviour. I mean, in corporate situations, going to HR or something usually doesn't do much or bring any real change.

46. [0:09:33.1] I know that in a lot of corporate environments, there's usually a team focused on promoting anti-discriminatory practices and handling those kinds of situations. I might talk to them as well and try to support or uplift the colleagues who are being discriminated against. But yeah, I

think it's really hard to think about such situations hypothetically, because a part of me wants to say that I'd be super righteous and, of course, speak up and do something.

47. [0:10:16.4] But also, we live in such a world where even if you do mostly nothing happens and you see it like every day and that's really sad.

48. But yeah, I think I would maybe try to very carefully talk to the person who's being disrespectful, to the supervisor.

49. [0:10:36.6] I: And, for example, let's say that after one of those meetings, several of your team members openly spoke up about the situation, would that give you some motivation to join them? Would it make it easier for you to speak up during the meeting as well?

50. [0:11:05.0] P3: I think no, I still wouldn't speak up during a meeting. I feel like no matter how I disrespectful the person is being, I don't like putting people on the spot, like in front of the big audience.

51. [0:11:21.5] I: Yeah, fair enough.

52. P3: [0:11:24.4] You know, it's like when you're at a restaurant, and the server isn't doing a good job, and then their supervisor comes and scolds them in front of everyone, I think that's really in bad taste.

53. [0:11:37.0] So no, I would not join because I don't like putting people on the spot. And this kind of situation just, yeah, no, I would rather talk to the person alone.

54. [0:11:48.0] I: Okay. Yeah, fair enough. Interesting point. Thank you.

55. [0:11:52.0] Then let's move to a third scenario, which is also about career advancement, but more connected to the industry change.

56. So, let's imagine that you're currently working at Samsung, which is, of course, a technology company. Now, imagine you receive a job offer from a tobacco company offering a high position,

along with a salary increase and excellent benefits. When you mention this opportunity to your close colleagues at your current job, you discover that most of them have strong negative opinions about working for that kind of company.

57. Can you walk me through how you would approach that decision?

58. [0:12:42.5] P3: Well, I probably wouldn't talk to my colleagues about job opportunities before deciding whether to take them or not. But in this case, if I did, and they said it's bad, I'd want to know more. Like, are they saying the industry itself is bad, or have they actually worked at this specific company and had negative experiences there?

59. [0:13:05.4] I: So, they just don't approve of those kinds of industries, right? Like, it's not a popular choice for them because it involves tobacco, similar to how some people feel about alcohol or other such industries.

60. [0:13:14.9] P3: If it's just for social reasons, because of what the company sells then I wouldn't care.

61. I: it's really easy to make an interview with you. Thank you.

62. [0:13:30.2] P3: Because if the reasoning was, for example, that it's a very toxic workplace, or that they know the company treats its employees badly, or that the people who work there are really difficult to deal with, then I would think about it.

63. [0:13:49.8] But if their reasoning is just that it's a bad industry because it involves alcohol or tobacco, then no, I wouldn't let that influence me.

64. [0:13:55.2] I: Yeah, okay. So, the next scenario is about corporate expenses. Let's imagine you discover that a few of your colleagues in your department submit personal expenses, like restaurant lunches or taxi rides for private use as business costs. They mention that it's pretty common and, most importantly, very difficult to check, meaning almost nobody notices. Now, imagine they suggest that you start doing it the same way because it's more convenient. What would you do?

65. [0:14:35.4] P3: So, first of all, regarding my colleagues doing it, I would pretend to be blind in my left eye and half-blind in my right eye.

66. I have not seen or heard anything. And I would not do it myself though. Not because like I care about the company or anything, but I am, I have high, high morals when it comes to stuff like this.

67. And I'd rather be, you know, poor but sleep well at night and have a good conscience than do this and risk, you know, being found out.

68. [0:15:22.3] Or, you know, just knowing that something might happen would make me anxious.

69. So, I'd rather sleep well at night than think about this stuff.

70. [0:15:31.4] I: yeah, fair enough. I mean, you have quite a strong opinion right now.

71. Would this approach change if such behaviour became completely normalized, like, not officially, but unofficially, and everyone in your team was doing it? Would you still say no?

72. [0:15:56.0] P3: Yeah, probably. I think so.

73. [0:16:01.0] I: Okay, interesting. So, we're approaching the last scenario, which is about company changes. Let's imagine, I know you just joined Samsung, but still, your company introduces new policies, maybe because of a management change or for some other reason. These new policies are something you don't really agree with, right?

74. So, you personally disagree with the new practices or rules, for example, cutting employee benefits, increasing workload, or introducing things that don't align with your personal values. It's nothing illegal, but just different from what originally attracted you to work there. So, how would you approach that situation? What would you do if those changes were implemented?

75. [0:16:51.8] P3: I'm sorry, the connection was bad. Can you repeat the last sentence?

76. [0:16:56.7] I: Yeah, so you're already working for a couple of years there, you have a good relationship, everything is fine outside of these new policies.

77. So how would you approach the situation if no one of your colleagues were planning to leave? Like everybody just accepting the new rules, so what would you do?

78. [0:17:21.1] P3: Hmm. Oh, I see, it depends. If my income stays steady... but what kind of rules are we talking about exactly? I'd need you to be a bit more specific.

79. [0:17:42.8] I: Well, in that case, if the workload became unrealistic, benefits were cut, or the environment turned more toxic with things like micromanagement then I'd probably start looking for another job. I think once the atmosphere changes like that, it's really hard to stay motivated, even if the salary is good.

80. [0:18:00.2] P3: I had this kind of experience actually at my first job where I really liked the colleagues and everything was great and we got a new manager who I was not very aligned with his ideas.

81. Mm-hmm. But the people I worked with, I really liked the type of job I was doing and the people who were working there but I still decided to leave and look for better opportunities.

82. [0:18:36.2] So I guess, yeah, I think I would look for something else even if my colleagues weren't.

83. [0:18:42.2] I: Okay, great. Thank you. So, we did now all the scenarios. I just have a couple of more general questions.

84. [0:18:52.1] So what comes to mind to your mind when you hear the term ethical work environment, can you define it, what it means for you personally in a few words?

85. [0:19:03.9] P3: ethical work environment for me means open communication. So that you can speak your mind freely.

86. It's a place where you're not discriminated against for your age, gender, religion, or the country you come from. I think it's also a place where you can discuss your ideas freely, speak your mind, and feel heard. Yeah, I think that's it.

87. [0:19:41.7] I: Yeah. And probably the last question is, generally speaking, like you heard a few scenarios right now, does having the support or disagreement of your colleagues, of your team members, make it generally easier or harder for you to act to make decisions?

88. [0:20:01.3] P3: Of course, if you're supported it's much easier to make decisions. I mean, I think it's in every life area when the people you're close with support your decisions, you feel more confident about them.

89. I think if you're the kind of person that is not influenced completely by anyone around you or like you don't feel anything if you're supported then either you're like a very strong leader who is different than the rest of us.

90. [0:20:37.8] Or, I don't know, you're a sociopath, there is no in between. Or you're fine.

91. [0:20:47.6] I: Okay. Well, yeah, we are finished. Thank you very much for your participation.

92. I really got super valuable answers and it was very interesting talking to you. Really super thankful. Thank you for your time. One more time.

93. [0:21:03.1] P3: Thank you for having me.

Interview 4

1. 18 Min (Answers translated from German to English)
2. 16.10.25 21:11
3. [0:00:24.4] I: Hello, XXX. Thank you very much for taking the time to participate in my research today. I really appreciate you sharing your professional experiences.
4. Before we dive into the main topics, I'd just like to tell you a little bit about the structure of the interview. We'll start with a few introductory questions, followed by five hypothetical scenarios. Nothing extremely complicated, I just need your opinions, nothing else.
5. As I mentioned before, there are no right or wrong answers. You can answer however you want and be completely honest. It's 100% anonymous. So, if you're ready, we can start. Okay?
6. [0:00:53.7] P4: Yeah ok
7. [0:00:55.4] I: What is your current role and position within your organisation? Maybe you can tell me a little bit about what exactly you do?
8. [0:01:01.4] P4: I'm currently working as a concept specialist at XXX. I create media concepts for our clients and then discuss them with different departments, where I have to confirm the availability of resources and finalize the deal. After that, I create project and media plans, as well as presentations for clients. I also do statistical analyses. Then I go to our clients together with our key account manager, with the goal of basically winning the client.
9. [0:01:50.6] I: Sounds very interesting. So the next question is would you like to grow in your career? Is that important for you?
10. [0:02:00.7] P4: Yes, definitely. For the last three years in this company, my position has been constantly transforming. Since I work in the media industry, we're now extremely focused on digital transformation, so my position changes about every half a year, with new tasks and responsibilities. It's really a never-ending learning process.

11. [0:02:31.4] I: Wow, yes, I understand. Then let's move on to the next question. When you think about growing further in your career, which factors do you consider? What is most important for you, money, position, recognition, or something else?
12. [0:02:49.7] P4: Of course, salary plays a role, but it's not the main thing for me. It's really important to work in a good team with people I get along with, to have a positive working atmosphere, and to maintain normal working hours, that's the most important part for me. I also want to enjoy what I do. Money matters, but for me, it's more about the people and the environment.
13. [0:03:39.9] I: Okay. And when we mention being successful in terms of career, what does "career success" mean to you personally?
14. [0:03:50.5] P4: For me, success means that I can complete my tasks well and receive positive feedback from my manager that my work is appreciated and recognized. That's what success means to me.
15. [0:04:20.6] I: Okay. So, you mentioned that colleagues and teamwork are very important to you. How would you describe your relationship with your current colleagues? Are you close? Do you have a great team?
16. [0:04:34.4] P4: Yes, we have a really good team, that's one of the reasons why I wouldn't change my job. Of course, there can always be small issues, but overall, I get along very well with everyone. My boss is also great; I can always talk to her. I really like my coworkers and I'm always glad to see them on Monday mornings, which I think is a privilege nowadays. We have a small team, and I feel very comfortable with them, that's very important to me.
17. [0:05:10.1] I: Well, that sounds like a very good workplace. Okay, that was my introductory part. Now I'd like to move to the first scenario.
18. As I said, it doesn't have to be 100% relevant to your current role, I'm just interested in your thought process.

19. [0:05:34.6] Let's imagine your manager approaches you about a senior position. The role comes with a substantial salary increase and would be a big career step for you. However, your first major project would involve restructuring the team, which would mean eliminating many of your colleagues. Most of your current colleagues already know about this restructuring plan.

20. [0:06:05.1] Which factors would you consider before accepting or rejecting this offer?

21. [0:06:10.3] P4: Honestly, if I were offered that, I'm not sure I could accept it. I don't think I could personally handle being responsible for dismissing people from my own team. I wouldn't feel comfortable with that, so I would probably reject the offer.

22. [0:06:51.3] I: So basically, you would prefer to keep good relationships with your colleagues rather than take such a responsibility?

23. [0:07:01.2] P4: Yes, exactly. I mean, I would try, but it is very difficult situation.

24. [0:07:09.2] I: Okay, I can relate to that. It was a difficult question, sorry for that.

25. [0:07:13.6] Let's move to the second scenario, about workplace discrimination.

26. [0:07:22.6] Let's imagine that during a team meeting, your supervisor or team lead repeatedly interrupts and dismisses ideas from two of your female colleagues (or male, it doesn't matter), while engaging positively with the male team members.

27. This happens regularly. You notice that most people look uncomfortable, but no one says anything during or after the meeting.

28. How would you approach that situation?

29. [0:07:52.8] P4: I think first I would observe carefully, and if it kept happening, I'd talk privately with the supervisor about it. If that didn't help, I'd discuss it with a few of my colleagues, maybe we could bring up the issue and discuss it on a higher level. But if those who are being

discriminated against are okay with it, I probably wouldn't go further. However, if I were asked for support, I would definitely raise it to the next level.

30. We have clear rules for such situations in my company, so it has never happened. But if I imagine it, I would definitely discuss it openly.

31. [0:08:55.6] I: And if we imagine that a few of your colleagues would address the situation first, would it be easier for you to join them in this initiative?

32. [0:09:04.7] P4: Yes, definitely. If others also speak up, it would make it easier for me to join and support them.

33. [0:09:20.1] I: Okay, thank you. The next scenario is about career advancement, but this time, in a different industry.

34. Let's imagine you're still working in media, but this time you receive a job offer from a tobacco company. It offers a high position, a significant salary increase, and excellent benefits. However, when you mention this opportunity to your friends or colleagues, you discover that most of them have very strong negative opinions about the tobacco industry.

35. How would you approach this situation?

36. [0:10:03.6] P4: I think that would be an easy decision, I wouldn't take the job. I wouldn't feel comfortable working for that kind of company.

37. [0:10:14.9] I: Okay, that was clear. Let's move on to the next one, this one is about corporate expenses.

38. [0:10:24.3] Let's imagine that you discover a few of your colleagues in your department are submitting personal expenses, like private restaurant lunches or taxi rides home, as business costs.

39. They tell you it's quite common and difficult to check, so nobody really notices. They even suggest that you should start doing it that way too.

40. What would be your reaction?

41. [0:10:53.9] P4: No, I wouldn't do that. I think that's wrong, even if others do it. For me, those are clearly private expenses, and I wouldn't feel good about it. My position and reputation are more important to me than saving a few euros.

42. [0:11:34.2] I: And if we go a little further, imagine that this practice becomes completely normalized in your new team. It's not officially allowed, but it's like a "silent rule" everyone follows. Would your answer change?

43. [0:11:59.9] P4: I would have a group pressure in that case. I think I still wouldn't do it. To be honest, it might be difficult in such an environment, but I don't think I could bring myself to join in. But I can't say for sure how I would react in reality.

44. [0:12:33.6] I: Yeah, that was a tough one. Probably the most difficult question for everyone so far.

45. Okay, now we're at the last scenario.

46. [0:12:45.1] Let's imagine your company introduces new policies after a management change, for example, cutting benefits, increasing workload, or implementing practices that don't align with your values. You've been with the company for a few years and have a good relationship with your team.

47. [0:13:20.0] How would you approach this situation, considering that none of your colleagues are planning to leave?

48. [0:13:28.2] P4: I think I would leave the company. From my previous experience, I know that the atmosphere is just as important as the stress level at work. The work environment and conditions have to fit. If the atmosphere or workload became unbearable, I'd definitely reconsider staying.

49. For me, it's important to feel good at work and to have a supportive environment. If that's gone, then I'd probably start looking for another job, even if others stay.

50. [0:14:17.1] I: Okay, thank you very much. Now just a few final general questions.

51. When you hear the phrase “ethical work environment,” what comes to your mind? How would you describe it for yourself?

52. [0:14:31.8] P4: For me, it means treating others respectfully, even in stressful situations. Everything should be fair and transparent payments, communication, and processes. An ethical environment is one where you can grow personally and professionally, and where everything is done correctly.

53. [0:15:21.2] I: We talked a bit about your colleagues and team dynamics. Generally speaking, does having the support or disagreement of your colleagues make it easier or harder for you to act or make decisions?

54. [0:15:37.2] P4: Yes, I also notice it at my current work. It can be difficult when everyone thinks differently, but usually we discuss things openly. If you have a good team, you can talk things through, even when opinions differ. That’s important for me, being able to rely on each other on a human level.

55. [0:16:24.8] I: Okay, that makes sense. In general, what keeps you committed to an organisation? Do you have any personal red lines, situations where you’d say, “I’m out”?

56. [0:16:40.0] P4: For me, it’s when I have a clear work time and not so much over hours. Sometimes in high season I am ready to stay longer, but it should be regulated. But when you are always in stress and chaos, I would leave the company.

57. [0:17:25.9] I: Okay, that was all my questions. Thank you very much again. It was very interesting.

58. I’ll definitely take a few quotes from your answers, if you don’t mind.

59. [0:17:31.1] P4: Of course, no problem.

Interview 5

1. 28 Min
2. 17.10.25 21:05
3. I: Hi, XXX
4. P5: Hi
5. [0:00:02.6] I: Thank you so much for taking the time to participate in my interview today. I really appreciate your time, and I'm looking forward to hearing about your professional journey. I would like to mention that there are no right or wrong answers; you can answer freely. It's also completely anonymous, and for me, the most important thing is to follow your thinking process. So, a little bit about the structure of the interview: I will have a few entrance questions where I will ask you about your current role and professional experience. Then, we will have four hypothetical scenarios where, again, you can answer how you want and be totally honest. Finally, we will finish the interview with more general questions, where I will ask you about your personal definitions, opinions, and your professional path. Are you fine with that?
6. [0:01:15.4] P5: Yes.
7. [0:01:16.7] I: Okay.

8. Then I would like to start. Okay. Then I would like to start. Please tell me a little bit about your current role or position within your organisation. What are you doing exactly?

9. [0:01:50.4] P5: Thank you for giving me this opportunity today to speak and for requesting my experiences, and thank you also for your introduction. So, just quickly about myself: I'm XXX, I'm 31 years old. I'm a project manager with about two and a half years of experience. Right now, I work in XXX, which is an IT subsidiary, and we are handling a large number of IT projects for multiple subsidiary companies, as well as in the CE sector. We have a few branches in multiple countries where we also do projects. Regarding my own experience, I was promoted recently, six months ago, from a junior to a mid-senior position. I currently have responsibility for many projects, ranging from smaller to very large ones.

10. [0:02:37.0] Regarding my own experience, I've been promoted recently, six months ago, from a junior to a mid-senior position. And I currently have the responsibility for a lot of projects, ranging from smaller to very large projects

11. [0:03:02.0] I: Okay, sounds very interesting.

12. And the next question is, would you like to grow further in your career?

13. [0:03:15.9] P5: I think it's very important to grow consistently, to take new challenges as they arise, and to jump into new opportunities if possible.

14. However, I also think it's important to balance your life together with your job, and to find the right balance between growth and personal aspirations, as well as your private

15. [0:03:38.8] I: Okay, then speaking about growth, when you think about advancing in your career, are there any factors you consider which are most important for you when you think about professional growth?

16. [0:04:01.8] P5: I think, firstly, you have to be ready for the transition. So, when you grow professionally, and let's say in my current role, you're taking on bigger challenges and bigger projects with a different volume, different scope, or a more complex environment or deliverables. You need to be personally ready for this, which means that you have to obviously learn a lot on the job, as well as do extra training if possible and feasible, and if you find the time to do so. But I think it's also important to see your own limitations, to understand what you can do without overburdening yourself or taking high risks in order to get opportunities, but potentially making mistakes that could cost the company, let's say, or yourself in terms of stress or financial results.

17. [0:04:54.6] I: Yeah, okay. Sounds legit. So just to wrap it up, just briefly, maybe in your own words, what does career success then mean to you personally, what is it for you?

18. [0:05:10.5] P5: I think that's easy. It's when you can fulfill yourself professionally, so you're doing things that you enjoy doing. There is a degree of growth, so there should be mobility, either horizontally or vertically.

19. In my current focus, I would say I would rather focus vertically. So, I want to gain deeper knowledge in my domain that I'm currently in. Yeah.

20. [0:05:37.6] I: First of all, do you have a team, and do you think that teamwork is important? How big a role does it play in your current position?

21. [0:05:48.7] P5: I mean, for project managers, this is really part of the game, to say so bluntly. We are always working in teams. We have a diverse group of stakeholders, we have people from business domain, we have IT developers, obviously it's IT projects in my case. We have a management that should also be considered at any stage, as well as we have different departments within our own company.
22. So, on client side, on stakeholder side, as well as on company side, there is a variety of people, and yeah, I think it is extremely important that the cooperation is highly productive and positive and that cooperation on all fronts is ensured. And I think part of the responsibility here lies within the project manager to bring everybody on board.
23. And I think part of the responsibility here lies within the project manager to bring everybody on board.
24. [0:06:43.3] I: Okay, yeah, thank you very much. That was just an introduction question, and now we will slowly move to my scenarios. So, I said it's going to be four or five situations, depending on your time. Just a small reminder: there are no right or wrong, desirable or undesirable answers, so you can just answer the way you want.
25. [0:07:15.1] So, scenario number one is about an opportunity for promotion, which is actually exactly what happened to you recently, so maybe you can particularly relate to that. Let's imagine your manager approaches you about the next position, which in your case would be a senior position. It just opened up, and it comes with a 30% salary increase and would mean a big career step for you. However, your first major project would involve leading a restructuring that eliminates a lot of positions to cut costs. And most of your colleagues know about the restructuring plan. So, can you elaborate a little bit on how you would approach it, what you would consider before accepting or rejecting this offer?
26. [0:08:12.8] P5: I mean, in your case, as you outlined it, you have a lot of information given there, transparency here, which is often, I think, not the case. But if we assume that you get full information on the ramifications, the consequences, both good and bad, that it will have for a lot of employees, then I would seriously, in this case, consider whether I want to take this challenge.

Because I can clearly sense that there is a huge compromise to be made here, and I would be the key driver of having a lot of undesirable outcomes for many of my potential coworkers.

27. So, I would definitely reevaluate it and talk to management regarding the plan, the strategy, and the outcomes. I would consider factors such as whether there are different adaptations we can make to the scope or quality of the project itself in order to minimize the damage to potential coworkers or stakeholders. So, in this case, it's not a clear answer, really, to say I would like to do that, because I'm not sure I would feel good cutting off or helping, in a project management role, to cut a lot of jobs.

28. [0:09:37.7] I: Okay. And can you evaluate how important would be your colleagues' support or disapproval? Would it influence your choice or any considerations?

29. [0:09:52.9] P5: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, if I know the consequences, if I am already briefed about the consequences that this will have for these, I assume, coworkers that are approaching me or that I talk to, I would feel, I would feel it like, it would amplify my doubts on doing it that way as it is outlined. Because I see directly how these people face to face, and I see them personally, and I talk to them; obviously, I'm much connected to them.

30. And rather than just being anonymous figures or anonymous figureheads that I'm not aware of, which is easier to make difficult choices with, in this case, probably it would severely impact my ability to just move ahead without any doubts.

31. [0:10:51.8] I: Thank you very much. Very valuable answer. Then I would move to my second scenario, which is about, unfortunately, quite a common practice: workplace discrimination.

32. So, imagine during team meetings, your supervisor or your team lead repeatedly interrupts and dismisses ideas from two female colleagues while engaging positively and respectfully with male team members. This happens regularly, and at some point, you notice most people start to look and feel uncomfortable, but no one says anything during the meetings or afterward. However, a few of your colleagues finally addressed this at a meeting, but the rest stays silent.

33. So would what would be your reaction in that case?

34. [0:12:10.2] P5: Of course, there's a social boundary when almost nobody is speaking up and something is off or unfair. In this case, it makes it harder to speak up, but on the other hand, I think it is in the interest of the company and the interest, since in this scenario, it's a team working together to be transparent. When there are certain things that are potentially holding back people from doing their job, or from being motivated, or that they feel bad about this social dynamic

35. I think it is definitely worth it and it can definitely improve the dynamic of the team to speak up, even if nobody else does it. Maybe I would not do it immediately, but I think, first of all, you can talk after the meeting. If this is a one-time occurrence, it probably can happen, but if it's always and systematic, that two people are discriminated against based on their gender or other characteristics that they possess

36. I think there's absolutely no question to speak up and mention it at some point.

37. [0:13:22.1] I: Would you speak up when nobody would mention anything?

38. [0:13:27.9] P5: This is a complex question because everybody, I think, in the business world has experienced more or less that there is a certain degree of conformity that everybody kind of subscribes to. So, if nobody says a word, you always have to question what the repercussions are for me personally.

39. But as I said before, I think it's important you can act morally and positively, but at the same time, make a case for improving the team dynamic and improving results. So you also hear that it makes sense to speak up and say it.

40. [0:14:18.5] I: Thank you. Then we would move now to a third scenario, which is about career growth, just from a different perspective.

41. So, you mentioned recently that you're working for XXX. Imagine you receive a job offer from a different industry now in this example, from a tobacco company. It offers a high position with a quite substantial salary increase and also excellent benefits. However, when you share that

opportunity with your close colleagues, you discover that most of them have strong negative opinions about working for the tobacco industry. You also learn that a few other people from your department recently turned down similar offers from companies in the tobacco sector.

42. [0:15:37.7] So, can you just walk me through how you would approach that decision?

43. [0:15:47.4] P5: Well, first of all, I think here I have to bring in my own bias, which is that I have my own boundaries where I say there are certain industries I find morally difficult, industries I would not feel comfortable supporting financially, such as gambling, the oil industry, or, in this case, tobacco. It's also about the health impact that everybody knows, smoking and cigarettes have a very bad effect on health, causing cancer and so on.

44. So that's the first thing. Number two, if my colleagues, co-workers, or friends suggested that I take this job, it would not affect me, because, for the same reason as number one, my personal compass always wins in this case. I have to be able to stand in front of myself when I make these decisions. What other people say may have an impact on me, and I'm interested in their opinions I take their feedback, which I think is a great opportunity to get perspectives from outside of your own scope but it would not change my decision, which in this case would definitely be to decline the offer, even if the payment is good.

45. [0:17:01.0] I: Thank you. So, we are now approaching my last scenario, which covers the topic of corporate expenses. Let's imagine you discover that a few colleagues in your department submit personal expenses, like lunches or taxi rides as business costs. They mention that it's pretty common and that it's impossible to check. Now, imagine they suggest that you also start doing it this way. How would you react to such a suggestion? Would you consider starting to do it as well?

46. [0:17:44.1] How would you react to such a suggestion? Would you consider starting to do it as well?

47. [0:17:55.8] P5: Yeah, probably not. I think, again, I have to first ask myself what I would want—if it was with them, if they would suggest it to me or not suggest it to me—but do I think this is the correct way to handle business expenses? Is this fair?

48. So, I would value it against my own moral compass, number one, and secondarily, I would then talk to them, like how they see it, and again take their opinion. Maybe some of these expenses are actually just justified because when the taxi brings you faster to a client, you can definitely write it off as a business expense. Go against the suggestions, essentially.

49. [0:18:56.8] I: And what if this particular practice becomes completely normalized within the organisation? So, not just a few of your colleagues doing that, but actually the whole team, including, yeah, including the department head. Would your answer change in that case?

50. [0:19:17.9] P5: I mean, if it is normalized and everybody advocates for this, then at some point, you can almost consider it like a business benefit when everybody does it. I don't know if this is aligned with management or if it's just behind the scenes. So, you definitely need some nuance here, but if everybody does, let's say, consider it officially and everybody's openly talking about it, I would probably do it as well

51. But if everybody's kind of playing against the rules of the business and just trying to hide it, this is already more difficult. So here I would definitely have to think about it, but the pressure is definitely there.

52. [0:19:58.5] I: I will just clarify that again. It is not official, but still completely normalized in the team. But as I said before, it is a common practice because it's almost impossible to check it up. So, everybody does it, but it's not normalized in such a way that it is listed as a corporate benefit.

53. [0:20:28.8] P5: Yeah, I mean, as I said, I think it's very tempting and I will devalue. Difficult, you know. Yeah, as I said, definitely tempting, and I probably, if everybody would do it, and it's kind of okay.

54. But then again, it depends on the amount of money. So, I guess there's differences depending on how much money it costs for the company. Is it severely impacting the business of a small company or organisation? Yeah. And how is the rest of the overall benefit package?

55. [0:21:31.7] I: Well, sounds interesting. Thank you.

56. P5: It's debatable. It debatable.

57. [0:21:38.6] I: Okay. Okay (laughing),so that was my four scenarios. And I would just, first of all, thank you very much for your very interesting and valuable answers. I just have a few general questions. I hope we can make it in time.

58. [0:22:04.4] We discussed, uh, yeah, different situations, and I also heard different reasoning from your side. When speaking about an ethical work environment, what comes to your mind when you hear about that term? What does it mean for you personally?

59. [0:22:27.8] P5: Quite simply, it's an organisation that is built by people for people. So, an ethical work environment puts humans first and does not value profit and return over, let's say, employee satisfaction, customer satisfaction, and quality of the product. I think a company has to have an intrinsic drive that is not necessarily market-driven or result-oriented, but to deliver excellent products and services. And I think this is of moral integrity.

60. If a company operates that way, and of course, what is extremely important in that sense, and also facilitates, since we've discussed it already in the beginning good cooperation between employees and stakeholders, it creates an overall much healthier dynamic between coworkers and stakeholders.

61. [0:23:30.5] I: Okay. I asked you about your team and behaviour of your team members. Generally speaking, does having the support or disagreement of your colleagues make it easier or harder for you to act a certain way? Do you consider them while making decisions?

62. [0:23:52.6] P5: Of course, it depends. Am I working actively with them? If they're my direct partners with whom I'm collaborating, then of course it amplifies my results as well as my motivation to work on a project. If I know that everybody inside the project let's say my project team is feeling well, doing well, that everyone is on board and motivated, that's a strong drive for me to push faster and move forward more quickly.

63. But you also always have to find the right balance between moving forward and giving people time to breathe and have some space as well.

64. [0:24:40.0] I: Okay, thank you. So, my last question is more general, about the organisation. When thinking about an ethical work environment, sometimes things happen after a restructuring. I know that you experienced this just a few months ago, a management change. And because of the change in management, corporate policy might also shift in a completely different direction.

65. So, what keeps you generally committed to an organisation, let's say, if you disagree with some of their new policies, practices, or decisions? Do you have any personal red lines?

66. [0:25:38.0] P5: I mean, aside from the red lines that I outlined before regarding industries and outcomes, I would say that if the company is living up to a high standard of results, a high standard of products, a high standard of satisfaction, and values its people, then potentially a management shift can change the direction of the company, but it doesn't necessarily have to impact the culture directly, at least not in the short term

67. So, I would say I'm not necessarily loyal or not loyal to a specific company; it all depends on whether I feel that people are working productively together, that there are growth opportunities, and that the projects I'm doing are interesting for me. Of course, it's also about the job itself, is there a healthy dynamic between coworkers? So, there's a wide variety of factors that play a role, and management is, I would say, just one of them, one of many.

68. [0:26:58.8] I: Now, is there anything what make you leave the company? Something what you would not tolerate.

69. [0:27:16.1] P5: I mean, to bring in this buzzword, a toxic work culture would definitely make me leave. Let's say when there is an incentive within the company that coworkers sabotage one another or speak badly behind their backs, and when, let's say, the workload is unmanageable for employees and people are struggling to do their job.

70. Another one would be if there is a lack of feedback, let's say there is no positive feedback and there is a lot of pressure. There's a lot of pressure to deliver, but when the people deliver, it is not

appreciated. That would also be, in the long run, demotivating and potentially cause me to quit, I guess.

71. Yeah, just to name a few.

72. [0:28:12.5] I: Those were all my questions for today. As I said, this interview will stay completely anonymous.

73. P5: Yeah, thank you for this opportunity, yeah. Bye.

Interview 6

1. 25 Min

2. 18.10.25 19:10

3. [0:00:07.7] I: Hi, XXX

4. Thank you very much once again for taking your time and participating in my interview. I really appreciate it.

5. I: So, before we dive into the topic, I'd just like to briefly explain how we'll structure the interview. I'll ask you a few questions related to your work environment and work practices, followed by around five hypothetical scenarios where I'd like to hear how you make your decisions.

6. It's important to mention that there are no right or wrong answers, you can answer freely and exactly how you think. And of course, everything will be completely anonymous.

7. P6: Okay, great.

8. [0:01:07.1] I: So, if you don't mind, I'll start with my first question. I'd like to know what your current role and position are within your organisation. Could you tell me a little bit about what you're doing at the moment?
9. [0:01:21.6] P6: So, currently, I'm working as a retail project manager in a media agency. We receive briefings from clients and then carry out projects involving furniture, branding, and also some aspects of marketing. So, mainly, it's project management in the retail area.
10. [0:01:46.4] I: And your main client is Samsung as far as I know.
11. [0:01:50.7] P6: Yes, the main client. The main client is Samsung.
12. [0:01:53.7] I: Okay, sounds very exciting. So, the next question is quite general, would you like to grow in your career? Is it important for you?
13. [0:02:10.7] P6: Yes, it's actually very important for me. So currently, I'm also a project manager, and I would also like to grow into a senior project manager now soon, actually, of course. Also, being at the younger age, it's very important for me to grow and grow fast.
14. I: Yeah. I mean, understandable, of course.
15. [0:02:40.8] Okay. Could you just briefly explain what career success means to you personally? Because it can be different for everyone.
16. P6: [0:02:51.9] For me, it's honestly most important to really feel good at work and, of course, to feel needed and to contribute something meaningful, not just be in the office trying to pass the time.
17. So, the work environment is important as well, not having big hierarchies. Being able to communicate directly and openly, talk to the boss about things, and make decisions quickly is very important to me.
18. Yeah, but this is afterwards, this should also be, of course.

19. I: [0:03:38.3] Yeah, but not number one priority for you.

20. P6: not number one, yes.

21. I: [0:03:44.5] Okay. Thank you. And what about team? How would you describe your professional relationship with your colleagues? Do you understand each other?

22. P6: [0:04:00.3] Yeah, as we are a small team, actually, so we work closely with each other. So, we know each other pretty well and also spend time sometimes privately at events.

23. For example, we were at the Wiener Wiesen. It was not private, it was from the company, but it was still courageous to be with everybody and everybody likes each other. And so, yeah, due to the fact that we are a small team, we work very closely. Therefore, our relationship is very important.

24. [0:04:27.2] I: Yeah, I agree with that. Okay. Yeah, that was just a few entrance questions. Thank you very much.

25. Very interesting.

26. [0:04:37.3] So, I would suggest we smoothly move on to my hypothetical scenarios. Just one more reminder, there are no right or wrong answers, so just answer based on how you feel. The first scenario is about a promotion opportunity. And just to mention, it's not necessarily directly related to your specific position.

27. [0:05:26.4] Okay, so my first scenario is about a promotion opportunity. As already mentioned, there are no right or wrong answers. So, let's imagine your manager or boss approaches you about a senior position, which, as far as I understand, would actually be quite relevant for you.

28. And the role comes with a 30% salary increase, which is, of course, very important, and it would mean a big career step for you. However, your first major project would involve leading a

restructuring of the whole team, which would potentially mean that many of your colleagues could lose their positions. Most of your colleagues are already aware of this restructuring plan.

29. So, the question is: which factors would you consider before accepting or rejecting this offer?

30. [0:06:20.1] P6: that's a tough question. Yeah, I think I would have to think about it.

31. But honestly speaking, that wouldn't really be a possibility for me, because in that case, I'd be the person who actually decides who gets fired, right?

32. [0:06:49.1] Oh, yeah, in this case, I wouldn't like to do that, actually. But since my team is small, it would be even harder. If it were a bigger team, then hypothetically, I wouldn't be as close to everyone, and I could approach it in a more analytical way, for example, by looking at who performs the best.

33. And yeah, in this case, then I would maybe think about accepting it. But in my current job, I would not.

34. [0:07:29.0] I: And what your colleagues support or disapproval actually would influence your choice in this regard?

35. [0:07:51.1] P6: So, because of the personal relationships with each other, I think I wouldn't be able to decide who deserves to stay.

36. I: So, it would be mentally difficult for you and not really worth it.

37. [0:08:06.2] It would be personally a difficult decision to...

38. I: Okay. Yeah.

39. [0:08:11.2] P6: Career-wise, yes, but personally, knowing them, it wouldn't be easy to do. Though, hypothetically, if it were a huge company, it might be different.

40. And if I were in that position, I would take it and approach it in an analytical way, keeping the most important ones.

41. [0:08:35.4] I: Okay. Yeah. I mean, it was a tough question. I agree.

42. Okay. Then we're moving on to the next scenario, which is connected to an unfortunately quite common situation, workplace discrimination.

43. [0:09:00.8] So, again, just a hypothetical scenario: let's say that during team meetings, your supervisor or direct boss repeatedly interrupts, disrespects, or dismisses ideas from two female colleagues, while engaging very positively and respectfully with the male team members. And this has been happening regularly, not just once.

44. So, you start to notice that most people are beginning to look and feel uncomfortable, but no one says anything during the meetings or afterward. However, a few weeks ago, someone from another department finally spoke up in their team meeting about that behaviour, and you've heard that a few of your colleagues also want to support addressing it.

45. What would you do in that situation? How would you approach it? Would you care about such things?

46. [0:09:55.8] P6: Yes, I would care about such things, and I would definitely support them. I would use my influence to try to find a way to talk to our boss about it, and if it wasn't in my power to handle it directly, I would support my colleagues as a group so that we could approach him together and try to address the issue.

47. [0:10:26.6] I: And if you imagine that none of your colleagues spoke up, no one at all, would you still approach your boss, even though it's not personally related to you, since you're not the one being discriminated against?

48. [0:10:45.2] P6: Yes, I would also try to have a personal talk with the boss, I think. I mean, it's a hypothetical situation, but in my case, I would probably be one of the older colleagues or someone

moving into a more senior role. That's why I would see it as my personal responsibility to address it.

49. [0:11:11.0] I: Okay. Thank you very much. Very, very interesting.

50. Then let's move to a third scenario, which is about industry change and also career opportunities.

51. So, imagine you receive a job offer from a tobacco company offering a high position, let's say, also in project management or marketing, with a considerable salary increase and excellent benefits. When you mention this new opportunity to your close colleagues in your current team, you discover that most of them have strong negative opinions about working for tobacco companies.

52. Can you walk me through how you would approach your decision and what factors you would consider?

53. [0:12:11.4] P6: Mm hmm. So yes, of course, there's a moral dilemma there.

54. If I'm honest, I would think about it carefully. One option would be to talk to my current bosses and let them know that I have an offer with similar or even better benefits, to see if they want to keep me. But if that's not possible, and I have this opportunity to work, even if it's for a tobacco company, in project management, then I would probably still take it to make a step forward in my career.

55. [0:13:03.6] I: So, would you say that the opinions or attitudes of your peers wouldn't really influence your choice?

56. [0:13:10.3] P6: I think it depends. For example, I was once checking positions, and one of them was at XXX, you know, the company that produces weapons.

57. Things like this and there I had a bigger dilemma you know.

58. [0:13:31.2] I would have a dilemma with that, and probably also with alcohol, but with tobacco, a bit less. Because I would just be a project manager in retail or something similar, not directly selling it. Still, it's not completely okay, but yeah, it really depends on the area.

59. [0:13:53.3] So, if my colleagues told me the same, that they also think it's morally not okay, it would definitely influence me not to take it. It would just be a confirmation or approval of what I already think.

60. [0:14:05.4] I: Ah, okay. Yeah, that's interesting point. Okay.

61. [0:14:13.4] P6: With tobacco, I would say, yeah, no I mean, I'm not producing or selling it or trying to increase sales. I'd just be, you know, working on the furniture or whatever.

62. So, it depends on the area. But yes, colleagues' opinions would matter to me, yes.

63. [0:14:36.1] I: Okay, thank you. So, we are now approaching the fourth scenario, which is about corporate expenses.

64. So again, imagine you discover that a few of your colleagues in your department submit personal expenses, for example, restaurant lunches or taxi rides as business costs, even though they're for private use. They mention that it's pretty common.

65. And most importantly, it's very difficult, almost impossible to check. There's really no way to compare or verify it, and nobody ever does. Now, imagine they suggest that you also start doing it this way. Can you walk me through your decision-making process in that situation?

66. [0:15:25.4] P6: Yes, yes. So, in this case, I mean, I don't mind if they are doing it, I don't really care.

67. For me personally, I would not do that for private expenses. I mean, if I'm on a company trip and I eat or whatever, I would try to claim the appropriate expenses, of course. But I wouldn't submit invoices for private things for example, if I ate out on Saturday privately and tried to claim it, I would not do that.

68. [0:16:07.2] But generally, I would try to get the maximum, of course, if it's genuinely business-related travel or whatever. I mean, if I'm out for a project and I'm going to eat well, and the company is going to pay for it, I'm definitely going to claim it.

69. I: What if, let's say, this practice became completely normalized and absolutely everyone on your team was doing it, would that change your approach?

70. [0:16:40.8] P6: That's hard, yeah, that's really hard to say. Right now, I think no, I wouldn't do it, but I don't know how it would actually be in that situation. Still, I'd say no.

71. [0:17:03.5] Mm-hmm. Okay. Very tempting.

72. Yeah, very, yeah. But I would really question my colleagues.

73. [0:17:17.1] I: Yeah. Okay. So, thank you very much.

74. We're approaching the last scenario for today, which is more general.

75. [0:17:24.4] So, let's say your company, because of a management change or something similar, introduces new policies that you personally disagree with. It could be anything, employee benefits, workload expectations, or just general practices that don't align with your personal values. Nothing illegal, but simply different from what originally attracted you to work there.

76. Now, imagine you've been with the company for a few years already, which is actually your case and you have a good relationship with your team. How would you approach this situation, considering that everyone else is just accepting it and none of your colleagues are planning to leave?

77. [0:18:19.5] P6: Hmm, yeah, I mean, we actually had something like that a while ago. But generally, I wouldn't say anything right away. Just because there's a new policy, I wouldn't immediately react by saying, "This can't be." I would wait it out first and see how things develop.

78. I did the same when there were changes made in our company recently. I decided to wait it out and see how things would turn out. If it didn't work out and I saw that it was really stressing me

or simply unnecessary, then I would speak up. But I wouldn't react right away, I'd wait and see how it develops. I think some things actually worked out well and some didn't, so it's more of an open process rather than just one side against the other.

79. [0:19:23.2] I: And what if, at some point, it becomes clear that things are just going to stay the way they are, and you're really not happy with that? Let's say you then discover that many of your close colleagues are actively looking for new jobs, would that change your approach?

80. [0:19:45.7] P6: Hmm, yes, maybe I'd talk to my colleagues, and together we could speak with the boss and try to find a solution. It shouldn't be that we all have to leave just because of the boss's stubbornness or unwillingness to listen.

81. But if he still insists to not care about our opinions, then I would also think about leaving, for example. More occasionally, they just don't care about what we say.

82. I would also think about leaving and I would also support my colleagues if they want to leave.

83. [0:20:30.3] I: Well, yeah, okay. So that was all my scenarios. Hopefully, they were not super difficult.

84. [0:20:40.3] P6: really good questions.

85. [0:20:44.6] I: Thank you. I just have last general closing questions, if you don't mind just to get understanding of your personal definitions of certain things.

86. [0:21:01.6] When you think about term ethical work environment, what comes to your mind, how you describe it for yourself?

87. P6. [0:21:14.1] Okay, so my definition would be that we do something that serves the environment and the world, however you see it, and not something that harms it.

88. [0:21:23.6] So, disservice would be if we harm people, health-wise, financially, or in any other way, and that would be unethical. So, thinking back to the previous scenario about tobacco, if I consider it now, then that would also be unethical.

89. Because you do harm people, but you harm them, I mean, they choose for it, but yeah.

90. [0:22:02.2] I: Yeah, I mean, at a point, it's true. I mean, they're choosing themselves fair enough.

91. P6: But if it would be directly influencing people and hurting them or hurting their businesses or personal lives, then this would be unethical. But providing service, like we do to actually also making good business for this for Samsung or for us and also providing the customer with positive things. That's ethical.

92. [0:22:53.1] I: Okay, so we discussed a few scenarios today, and I mentioned your team a few times. Generally speaking, does having the support or disagreement of your colleagues make it easier or harder for you to act in a certain way or make decisions?

93. [0:23:02.4] P6: Yes, it does

94. I: Thank you. And I have just the last question.

95. [0:23:23.1] When we talk about commitment to a company or organisation, do you have any personal red lines, situations where you would start to question your loyalty to the company?

96. P6: Mm, like how exactly?

97. I: No, I mean, like situations where you would decide to leave, something you would not tolerate, right?

98. P6: Okay, general red lines, yes, I would not tolerate disrespect, such as bosses screaming or putting you under pressure, or creating dilemmas where you're forced to choose between bad options. That kind of behaviour would not be acceptable to me.

99. Of course, harassment, also toward other colleagues, I could not support that or just stay silent and not say something. So, all those things matter to me. General respect is, of course, the most important thing.

100. I: Mm hmm. Okay.

101. P6: This would be red lines.

102. [0:24:40.4] I: Well, yeah, thank you very much. I hope it was not so long for you.

103. P6: Yes, great. Thank you for the questions, Vera. It was a really good question to think about also. Yeah, it was really good.