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# Modern Career and Identity Building in between Employed Work and Entrepreneurship

Narratives of Interim Managers

Anna-Maija Marjakangas

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# MODERN CAREER AND IDENTITY BUILDING IN BETWEEN EMPLOYED WORK AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Narratives of Interim Managers

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*To everyone who has the courage to dream -  
“There is only one thing that makes a dream impossible to achieve:  
the fear of failure” (Paulo Coelho)*

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between employed work and entrepreneurship – narratives of interim  
managers

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## ABSTRACT

New ways of working in between employed work and entrepreneurship are emerging. One of these is interim management, where a self-employed entrepreneur performs interim manager assignments for their client companies in a manner similar to that of an employed director. New ways of working, such as freelancing and other gig-work have profoundly impacted the labour market systematics and created a need to better understand these new ways of working. Although research on self-employment exists, the perspective on the careers of self-employed entrepreneurs has received less focus, and we know relatively little about it. A deep understanding of how individuals experience and make sense of their careers within the context of atypical work arrangements is still rather limited.

Understanding entrepreneurship as part of a career from the individual's perspective requires examining how they make sense of their identities within the liminal setting of working in between employed work and entrepreneurship. Liminality refers to a state of ambiguity and uncertainty, to a transitional position between different states. When individuals lack strong attachments to organizations, sustaining a stable work identity becomes problematic and requires more from the individual's agency. This becomes especially demanding for the self-employed who often work outside of stable organizations, established professions, and codified roles. For non-traditional work arrangements, such as entrepreneur interim managers, the stability, established roles and coherent narratives are often lacking, and individuals must find them elsewhere to build a coherent professional identity.

This study examines the sense-making of individuals' identity building within a career that involves non-typical work arrangements, such as self-employment as entrepreneur. This study adopts a social constructionist and narrative approach asking how the entrepreneur interim managers construct their careers and make sense of their identity in the liminal work-life between entrepreneurship and employed work. The perspective of this study is that of individual interim managers and the stories they share their work and careers.

The research data consists of repeated in-depth interviews of entrepreneur interim managers during their interim assignments from start to finish. The analysis focuses on the stories the interim managers tell about their way of working, assignments and overall careers. From these stories, three narratives are built that

draw understanding of careers, liminality, identity and entrepreneurship within this type of under-institutionalized ways of working.

The three narratives of *The Liminals*, *The Professional Interim Managers*, and *The Purpose-Driven Shuttlers* build understanding of how identity can be constructed in under-institutionalized roles, such as that of an interim manager. These under-institutionalized roles lack role models and narratives of what it means to be one, such as an interim manager, which makes identity building more difficult. In under-institutionalized roles individuals experience a liminal phase during which they play with different potential identities before committing to any of them. Liminality is a crucial phase in identity building. Identity building requires separation from the old identity; however, there also needs to be something else to build a sense of belonging to. This study provides understanding of how this sense of belonging is achievable when no clear role narratives exist to which to attach to. A solid identity can be achieved, even in this under-institutionalized setting. Eventually, if more individuals adopt a similar approach, the new way of working can become institutionalized. This enables a narrative about the way of working to be developed, allowing individuals to relate to and build their identity upon this way of working. An entrepreneurial identity is not a prerequisite for acting entrepreneurially, and entrepreneurial activities can be directed towards and for the benefit of targets other than one's own company, such as client companies. Entrepreneurship or self-employment as a status of work can mainly serve an instrumental role, helping one do the type of work one wants to do.

The grand narratives of the employed employee and the entrepreneur are the prevailing narratives of work life. When the narratives of the new ways of working in between the two are developed, this enables the institutionalization, and normalization of careers between employed work and entrepreneurship. This study provides a new understanding of this process and reveals that it is not necessary to identify as entrepreneur to act entrepreneurially.

**KEYWORDS:** Interim management, identity building, non-typical ways of working, entrepreneurship, self-employed careers, liminality, narrative research

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## TIIVISTELMÄ

Työn tekemisen uudet muodot palkkatyön ja yrittäjyyden välimaastossa ovat kasvamassa, ja yksi näistä uusista työn tekemisen tavoista on interim-johtaminen, jossa yrittäjänä toimiva henkilö toimii väliaikaisessa johtajan tehtävässä asiakasorganisaatioille. Interim-johtaminen muistuttaa hyvin paljon palkkasuhteessa tehtävää johtamistyötä, mutta on aina väliaikaista. Uudet työn tekemisen tavat, kuten freelance-työ ja muu keikkatyö, ovat vaikuttaneet merkittävästi työmarkkinoiden dynamiikkaan ja luoneet tarpeen ymmärtää paremmin näitä uusia tapoja tehdä työtä. Vaikka yksinyrittäjistä on paljon tutkimusta, yksinyrittäjien uranäkökulma on saanut vähemmän huomiota ja tiedämme siitä toistaiseksi melko vähän. Syvälinen ymmärrys siitä, miten yksilöt kokevat ja jäsentävät uraansa epätyypillisten työmuotojen konteksteissa, on edelleen varsin rajallista.

Yrittäjyyden merkityksen ymmärtäminen uran kontekstissa ja yksilön näkökulmasta edellyttää sen tarkastelua, miten yksilöt rakentavat ja jäsentävät identiteettiään työskennellessään rooleissa palkkatyön ja yrittäjyyden välimaastossa. Liminaliteetilla tarkoitetaan epäselvyyden ja epävarmuuden tilaa; eräänlaista siirtymä- ja välitilaa. Kun vahvat yhteydet organisaatioihin puuttuvat, vahvaa ammatillista identiteettiä on vaikeampi ylläpitää ja vakaan identiteetin rakentuminen vaatii yksilöltä enemmän. Tämä on erityisen haastavaa yksinyrittäjille, jotka toimivat vakiintuneiden organisaatioiden, ammattien ja roolien ulkopuolella. Epätyypillisten työnteon tapojen, kuten yrittäjänä työtä tekevien interim-johtajien kohdalla, vakiintuneet rakenteet ja roolit sekä selkeät uranarratiivit puuttuvat, ja yksilöt joutuvat etsimään nämä muualta rakentaakseen eheän ammatillisen identiteetin.

Tässä tutkimuksessa syvennytään yksilöiden identiteetin rakentumiseen urapolulla, jossa yksilöt työskentelevät epätyypillisen työn tekemisen muodoissa itsenäisinä yrittäjinä. Tutkimuksen ontologinen ja epistemologinen lähtökohta on sosiaalinen konstruktionismi ja näkökulma rakentuu narratiiviseen tulkintaan. Tutkimus kysyy, miten yrittäjänä toimivat interim-johtajat rakentavat uraansa ja jäsentävät identiteettiään työelämässä palkkatyön ja yrittäjyyden välissä.

Tutkimusaineisto koostuu yrittäjänä toimivien interim-johtajien toistetuista syvähaastatteluilta heidän asiakastoimeksiantonsa alusta loppuun. Analyysi keskit-

tyy niihin tarinoihin, joita interim-johdajat kertovat työn tekemisen tavoistaan, tehtävistä ja urastaan. Näistä tarinoista muodostuu kolme narratiivia, jotka rakentavat ymmärrystä urista, liminaliteetista, identiteetistä ja yrittäjyydestä silloin, kun uraan sisältyy työn tekemisen tapoja, jotka eivät ole yhteiskunnassamme vakiintuneita.

Kolme narratiivia – *The Liminars, The Professional Interim Managers ja The Purpose-Driven Shuttlers* – valottavat, miten identiteettiä voidaan rakentaa vakiintumattomissa rooleissa, kuten interim-johdajana. Näissä rooleissa ei tyypillisesti ole selkeitä roolimalleja tai valmiita narratiiveja siitä, mitä kyseisessä roolissa toimiminen tarkoittaa, mikä tekee identiteetin rakentamisesta haastavampaa. Tällaisissa rooleissa yksilöt käyvät läpi liminaliteetin vaiheen, jonka aikana he kokeilevat erilaisia mahdollisia identiteettejä ennen sitoutumista johonkin niistä. Liminaliteetti on tärkeä vaihe identiteetin rakentamisessa. Yksilön tulee irtautua vanhasta identiteetistä, mutta välttämätöntä identiteetin rakentumiselle on myös rakentaa yhteenkuuluvuutta johonkin uuteen. Tämä tutkimus luo ymmärrystä siitä, miten uutta yhteenkuuluvuutta voidaan rakentaa, kun selkeitä rooleja ja niiden narratiiveja ei ole tarjolla. Vahva identiteetti on kuitenkin mahdollista rakentaa myös tällaisessa ympäristössä, ja jos yhä useampi yksilö samaistuu tähän tapaan tehdä työtä, uusi työnteon muoto voi ajan myötä vakiintua ja siitä voi muodostua narratiivi, johon muutkin voivat samaistua ja rakentaa identiteettiään siihen peilaten. Yrittäjäidentiteetti ei kuitenkaan ole edellytys yrittäjämäiselle toiminnalle, ja yrittäjämäinen toiminta voi kohdistua muihin kohteisiin kuin omaan yritykseen, kuten asiakasyritykseen. Yksinyrittäjyyden merkitys työn tekemisen tapana voi olla lähinnä välineellinen, mahdollistaen sellaisen työn tekemisen, mitä yksilö haluaa tehdä.

Työelämän puhetta hallitsevat edelleen narratiivit palkkatyöstä ja yrittäjyydestä normatiivisina työn tekemisen muotoina. Kun palkkatyön ja yrittäjyyden välissä olevien uusien työn tekemisen muotojen omat narratiivit alkavat muotoutua, mahdollistuu myös niiden vakiintuminen ja normalisoituminen osaksi urapolkuja palkkatyön ja yrittäjyyden välillä. Tämä tutkimus tuo uutta ymmärrystä tähän prosessiin ja osoittaa, ettei yrittäjämäinen toiminta edellytä yrittäjäksi identifioitumista.

**AVAINSANAT:** Interim-johdaminen, identiteetin rakentaminen, epätyypilliset työn tekemisen tavat, yrittäjyys, yksinyrittäjän ura, liminaliteetti, narratiivinen tutkimus

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I have been making my journey to becoming a PhD ever since 2010 when I wrote my Master's thesis in Laws. For me, thinking and writing are interconnected, they take place together. I enjoyed writing my Master's thesis so much that already back in 2010 I considered continuing studying to become a PhD. However, life events took me to fabulous work possibilities within business, and the PhD needed to wait. However, many times during that decade, I continued discussions about the PhD and was close to starting this journey. Finally, my momentum came when I started as entrepreneur and was able to manage my own hours better than in employment – a theme familiar to this study as well.

It took some time to find the right home for my theme of interest – new ways of working in between employed work and employment. My interest in work life had for long been in management and leadership, rather than in laws and I wondered if it could be possible to write my PhD in School of Economics instead of Laws. I decided to pursue this idea. The decision to take this big rotation from Laws to Management and Entrepreneurship was definitely an excellent decision. I feel that this change of academic discipline has opened up and challenged my thinking in ways I could have not predicted. It was a struggle at first - I understood how profoundly our education directs our entire thinking system, and studying law had shaped my way of understanding the world in ways I had not realized before. At times during this PhD journey it felt like earthquake in my brain when concepts such as social construction, sense-making and narrative analysis really sank into my system. I believe that this change of academic discipline made this PhD journey more challenging, but far more interesting and has expanded my thinking in ways I could not have imagined.

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*Anna-Maija Marjakangas*

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# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Background and research phenomenon

Megatrends interact in a complex manner in the world, creating significant discontinuities in the operational environment of companies. Many organizations must continually update their strategies at an increasingly rapid pace, as the environment is constantly evolving. Companies face insecurity about the future; one source of insecurity is the rapid expiration of knowledge and required skills due to technological and economic development (Volini et al., 2020; OECD, 2023). Thus, markets have developed new forms in which companies can acquire the knowledge and skills they need. Companies operating in information-intensive and dynamic industries are increasingly utilizing a larger external workforce to acquire the specific knowledge and capabilities they need at a particular moment. This also relates to the possibilities of globalization, technological change, and economic uncertainty, which have altered how workplace relations function (Padavic, 2005).

About a decade ago, the term “gig economy” became part of our lexicon, and the gig economy began to emerge (McKinsey & Company, 2016). The gig economy could help individuals find new ways to generate income, create flexibility and autonomy, and ensure work–life balance (see Vadavi & Sharmiladevi, 2024). Gig work has been seen as dynamic, fostering innovation and adaptability (Spreitzer et al., 2017). Employers see the possibility of engaging people to perform specific work projects, while they can save money on administrative and other expenses compared to full-time employment (See Vadavi & Sharmiladevi, 2024). Over the last few decades, we have also begun discussing the *entrepreneurial turn in work–life*, suggesting that organizations need more individuals with an entrepreneurial mindset who work quite intrapreneurially within an organization (see Gerards et al., 2021). Organizations seek to employ individuals who can challenge existing practices, innovate, and create new ventures, enabling strategic renewal (see Gerards et al., 2021).

One emerging form of a non-typical ways of working as a self-employed individual in the gig economy is interim manager services, where an entrepreneur typically performs interim management assignments for client companies. The work of an interim manager is akin to gig work, as they operate as entrepreneurs, building

their professional portfolio through various assignments they perform for their clients. Simultaneously, they work closely within their client organizations in a very employee-like manner for the fixed period, with a focus on achieving the goals set for their assignment to benefit the client company. They hold a position within the client organization with a mandate to execute and implement decisions on the company's behalf. Interim managers work very intrapreneurially within their client organizations. They are assigned to situations such as unexpected leadership departures, transformation projects, mergers and acquisitions, temporary absences, leadership succession trials, or expert knowledge transfer (Fisher et al., 2024; see also, e.g. Ballinger & Marcel, 2010; Goss & Bridson, 1998; Rubin & Ohlsson, 2022).

Awareness and familiarity with interim business have increased over the past few years, and companies have increasingly begun considering using interim managers as a resourcing option, opening up new possibilities for highly experienced professional leaders to build their careers as entrepreneurs by performing interim assignments. Over the last few decades, these new forms of work, such as interim management, have started to develop and grow similarly to freelancing, agency work, and platform work. These new forms of working have profoundly impacted the labour market systematics, creating a need to define these new work arrangements more clearly to build a coherent understanding of their relationships with one another and better understand how they may affect labour market practices. For organizations, these new ways of working open the possibility of renewing how they can find capabilities and expertise for their use, helping them resource work more efficiently.

Interim management is a growing business; however, statistics on the business are relatively scarce. "Interim" is a term that can be used in many situations when the aim is to describe a service of expertise that is not permanent. According to a study conducted by the INIMA (International Network of Interim Managers Associations) in 2024, the typical European interim manager in 2023 was a man around age 59 with nearly a decade of experience in interim management. On average, the transition to interim management from permanent employment occurred at age 48; typically, the interim manager had experience in C-level roles. The top five functional specialities of European interim managers were general management (30.2%), finance (11.4%), operations (10.1%), human resources (8.8%), and IT (5.6%). The demand for interim managers has been high, as many providers reported a shortage of available interim managers in the study. Simultaneously, 2024 was reported to have had a slight reduction in interim management assignments (-4%) compared to 2023. This may reflect the sensitivity to interim management in response to economic trends. The European interim managers undertook assignments on a large scale in different types of organizations, ranging from start-ups to large corporations, as well as public organizations, private companies, and

non-profits. The average length of a European interim assignment was 11,5 months in 2024. The main sales channels for interim managers were their personal networks and personal marketing, as well as the interim management providers (discussed as *intermediate companies* later in this research). Digital marketplaces have not yet taken off, and personal relationships continue to play a significant role in the interim manager market (INIMA, The 2024 European Survey).

Because the business area of interim management is still relatively small and awareness of interim management is limited, companies struggle to find suitable candidates for their needs, as most interim managers are self-employed entrepreneurs. The INIMA Survey of 2024 on Interim Manager use in Europe also found a lack of qualified interim managers in the market. Due to the difficulties in finding interim managers to meet companies' needs, the intermediation of interim managers has become a growing business. These intermediate companies draw their pool of interim managers from which they have a better chance of finding suitable interim manager candidates for a company's particular needs. Notably, this is the structure of interim manager supply in Finland; the structures of businesses vary between different countries due to various factors, including local tax and labour law regulations.

The careers and the entrepreneurship of the self-employed are an important field of study in current work life. We tend to view entrepreneurship as a strongly growth-driven activity with only one direction: onwards and towards growth. Much research has focused on self-employment and entrepreneurship as an end state, in which returning to employed work is not a relevant option (Marshall, 2016; Burton et al., 2016). However, this is far from the reality; careers entailing self-employment and entrepreneurship are much more nuanced and versatile. Entrepreneurship and employed work have typically been viewed as two separate and different streams of activity, but the line between them seems more ambiguous than at first view. It is individuals who establish new ventures and, in most cases, transition from paid employment to self-employment (Sorensen & Fassiotto, 2011). Commonly, in contemporary work life, individuals experience transitions during their career between different employment types, such as waged work or self-employment (Koch et al., 2021). As Koch et al. (2016) well put it, "Self-employment is not a discrete state. Rather, it is a part of an individual's career that unfolds over time." Indeed, careers cross boundaries, and staying in only one career state has become increasingly less common (Arthur & Rousseau, 2001). Most individuals who become self-employed do not spend their entire career in this role, and self-employed careers exhibit significant heterogeneity (Koch et al., 2021). Much research focuses on the distinctions between different categories of self-employed individuals, including their motivational factors, engagement, and the number of employees (See e.g. Koch et al., 2021). Although research on self-employment exists, the perspective

on the careers of the self-employed has received less attention, and we know relatively little about it (Koch et al. 2021; Burton et al. 2016). There have been studies on the career success of the self-employed from subjective and objective career success perspectives and studies on career success of the necessity and opportunity self-employment (See e.g. Koch et al., 2021). Additionally, the career patterns of the self-employed (Zacher et al., 2012; Koch et al., 2021) and sustainable careers in non-standard work arrangements (Hennekam et al., 2021) have been explored. However, the deep understanding of how individuals experience and make sense of their self-employed careers within the context of non-typical work arrangements remains rather limited.

Understanding career and entrepreneurship from the individual's perspective also requires immersing in the concepts of identity and liminality. Identity refers to the question of "Who am I?" (Ashforth, 2001), and professional role identity is one sub-category of social identities that refers to individual's self-definition as a member of a profession and enacting this professional role (Ibarra, 1999). Liminality is considered a state of ambiguity and uncertainty – a transitional position in between different states (Turner, 1970; Beech, 2011). Liminality offers a lens through which one can analyze ambiguity, insecurity, and precariousness in the modern world (Söderlund & Borg, 2018). In identity building, liminality plays a significant role, and in the new ways of working that blur the lines separating employed work and entrepreneurship, liminality exists in many ways. It is essential to comprehend how individuals construct their identities within this liminal space where they navigate between employed work and entrepreneurship without being clearly defined as one or the other. This understanding of their identity influences their career, their experience within it, and the choices they make within it. When an individual lacks strong attachments to an organization, sustaining a stable work identity becomes problematic and demands more from the individual's agency (Petriglieri et al., 2019; see also Sennett, 1998; Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). This becomes especially demanding for independent, self-employed individuals who perform their work outside of stable organizations, established professions, and codified roles (Petriglieri et al., 2019). Professional and work identity have been extensively studied, but from perspective of the independent entrepreneurs, who work in liminal settings within organizations without being part of the organization, identity work still lacks research and understanding. They need to discover their frameworks for their way of working from somewhere other than where we typically find them. Typically, the framework for work comes from jobs that others design, with leaders giving direction and collegial interaction that helps individuals build identity and make sense of themselves in relation to others (See e.g. Petriglieri et al., 2019). For atypical ways of working, such as those of entrepreneur interim managers, these are often lacking and need to be discovered elsewhere.

This study focuses on the sense-making of individuals' identity-building within a career that involves atypical work arrangements. Most research on atypical work arrangements focuses on precarious work and individuals working in precarious work arrangements. These groups and individuals are in a vastly different position from the self-employed interim managers in this study, as the participants of this study are in a privileged position, with plenty of social capital, experience, and opportunities. This study examines this rather privileged group, how these interim managers working in liminal work arrangements develop an understanding of their professional identity within their careers, as well as the entrepreneurial aspects within it. This study attempts to build new knowledge within this context on how identity is built in liminal nontraditional work arrangements in between employed work and entrepreneurship, as well as how this identity work shapes the careers of individuals.

## 1.2 Research question

The focus of this research is on work that occurs in an atypical form and in an atypical setting. The work of the interim manager is neither entrepreneurship in the sense we are accustomed to understanding it, nor is it employed work in the sense that we have come to understand it. This study aims to build an understanding of how interim managers themselves perceive and make sense of their positioning, career, and entrepreneurship within their profession. The perspective focuses on how they build professional identity in this type of liminal setting and how this shapes their career choices. Their current positioning is limited to this moment in life, and this study builds an understanding of the past, present, and future as a unified picture that individuals use to draw from their experiences. None of these happens in a vacuum, but all are affected by one another. Understanding the present depends on our experiences and understanding of the past, just as we build our understanding of the past through our present experiences. The same applies to the future. Time is not linear in sense-making. Events are not linear in sense-making; however, they are intertwined in the most complex ways, and the chronology of events often overlooks many other connection points between events that may not seem connected through some objective lens. Through individual's subjective sense-making, unobvious connections can be experienced in trying to construct a coherent story about the past, present, and future. To explore all this, I propose the following research question: *How do the entrepreneur interim managers construct their careers and make sense of their identity in the liminal work-life between entrepreneurship and employed work?*

This research question problematizes the vague dualism between employed work and entrepreneurship in a context where boundaries have become increasingly

unclear and blurred. The research studies the diversity of situations on the border between entrepreneurship and employed work in the context of interim management. Even for the entrepreneur interim manager, there is not only one understanding of the career and entrepreneurship within it, nor is there only one way to build a solid identity within this setting; however, there are as many sense-makings on this as there are individual stories. As a theoretical framework for this work, I employ a combination of career construction and modern career theories, as well as theories on liminality and identity. Within management and organizational studies, the career has been extensively studied, but this has mainly occurred in the context of pre-existing organizations and within the changing work life. However, this discussion needs to be more closely tied to entrepreneurship as one possible stream of career path. In entrepreneurship research, the career perspective has been a prominent focus. Still, the interplay between these streams requires further research and understanding. This research bridges the gap between these views to better understand how entrepreneurship can be integrated into individual's career without distinguishing strongly between a career in organizations and within entrepreneurship, rather seeing the two as a continuum and a coherent narrative that individuals can build. A career can pass and fluctuate between entrepreneurship and employed work many times and in many ways, and we need to understand this better to normalize entrepreneurship and clear the smoky curtain that makes entrepreneurship "something else" from employed work within organizations.

This research emphasizes stories and sense-making. The data consist of stories from entrepreneur interim managers to understand how they make sense of their careers, identity, and entrepreneurship as part of their career and professional identity. This research attempts to understand the liminal state in which interim managers operate and the role this liminality plays in their career narratives and professional identity building. This research focuses to bringing understanding into how a solid professional identity can be developed in this type of liminal and non-typical setting. In the background, we need to consider the grand narratives of entrepreneurship and explore how these narratives shape the way participants act and understand their choices and potential choices within their careers. These narratives relate to the stories told about entrepreneurship in general. The narratives told on a general level about entrepreneurship are at the core of the dualism between entrepreneurship and employed work. They play a significant role in shaping entrepreneurial identity and decision-making regarding transitions to, within, and out of entrepreneurship throughout a career. These grand narratives eventually shape individual narratives. Through this approach and focus on the narratives, this study explores the different ways entrepreneurship can be considered part of a career and how a multiplicity of entrepreneurship opportunities exists, not only in the division between employment and entrepreneurship.

### 1.3 Research positioning and outline of the study

Because we have only limited knowledge on modern careers that can comprise different ways of working, including self-employment or entrepreneurship, we must build understanding on how self-employment and entrepreneurship can be part of an individual career without them being a one-way street – “the final destination”. This study builds upon a few streams of research.

First, the research builds upon the research on self-employment career studies. Self-employment is often viewed as a one-way street with no turning back. This view has been questioned, and studies on self-employment careers have also taken a more versatile approach to the careers (see, e.g. Koch et al., 2021). In the move towards boundaryless and more individual-centric careers, the perspective of the career shifts the individual’s focus to be more concerned with personal, rather than organizational, goals (see e.g. Arthur, Khapova & Wilderom, 2005). Several movements and transitions within a career can occur between jobs, organizations, occupations, industries, and employment patterns (e.g. unemployment, employment, and self-employment). These *de facto* movements also require psychological mobility, which refers to an individual’s psychological orientation towards making these transitions (Sullivan & Arthur, 2006). The non-linear career paths that new boundaryless types of careers entail greatly enable individuals to create a career based on their preferences (Guan et al., 2019). Just as some individuals remain entrepreneurs their entire lives once they enter that path, for others, entrepreneurship is just one phase in their careers (Hytti, 2011). Just as there are multiple careers that entail entrepreneurship, there are also multiple paths to entrepreneurship and multiple types of entrepreneurships. This research builds upon this stream of research by providing a new understanding of the career paths that entail liminal and non-typical ways of working.

Second, this study builds upon the research on professional identity building within liminal settings in atypical ways of working. The research attempts to develop a new understanding of previous research, which suggests that identity building becomes more demanding and requires more from the individual when there are no clear role models for the work or organizations to attach to, and what provides a framework for the individual in their work. (see e.g. Petriglieri et al., 2019; Ibarra & Obodaru, 2016). Seizing deep into the sense-making of the individual through repeated interviews and using a narrative approach brings new understanding of what happens in the identity work and identity play of the individual, as well as the measures individuals take to build a solid identity and create a framework for their way of working.

Third, this research contributes to the ongoing research discussion on the entrepreneurial way of working and to the development of entrepreneurial identity building. This research distinguishes between *entrepreneurship as a status, a noun*,

*an identity*, and *entrepreneurship as a verb – an activity*. These two are not as interrelated as they might appear at first glance. This study explores how interim managers make sense of their entrepreneurship and self-employment and what entrepreneurship means to them in their way of working. Both discussions are applied in this study to understand how they are visible in the stories of the interim managers. Through this question setting and building upon this division, this study provides insights into entrepreneurship research on entrepreneurial identity formation and entrepreneurship as an activity (i.e., *entrepreneurship*) and how they may shape one another. In this study, *self-employment* refers to the work status of interim managers and other self-employed entrepreneurs, i.e., working as a solo entrepreneur. Entrepreneurship refers to a phenomenon in a broader sense. In the interviews, the broader concept of entrepreneurship is used since, in the Finnish language, it can be understood as a way of working, a status, an activity, and a mindset.

The narratives that are generally told about entrepreneurship influence our understanding of entrepreneurship in both senses. The media plays a significant role in providing cultural tools, such as narratives, imagery, symbols, and role models, about entrepreneurs (e.g. Radu-Lefevbre et al., 2021). These narratives shape the general understanding of what entrepreneurs do and who they are, which influences the strengthening or weakening of an entrepreneur's entrepreneurial identity or that of a person wishing to be one. These narratives shape how individuals view entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurship shapes the narrative about entrepreneurship, but just as well the narratives that are told about entrepreneurship, shape entrepreneurship (Audretsch & Lehmann, 2023).

To explore all this, we first need to examine some of the key theories that serve as a lens through which we view our data. First, we examine the theories on modern careers. We need to understand the fundamental principles of sense-making in a career – how individuals develop their understanding over their careers. Careers do not happen anymore in organizations; a fundamental change that has occurred over the last few decades is the fragmentation of careers, making them more individual and more boundaryless than before (See, e.g. Arthur, 1994; Arthur, Khapova & Wilderom, 2005). This is particularly the case in the non-typical and liminal ways of working that our interim managers also present. This is why, in Chapter Two, we examine career construction theory and modern career theories to identify the general trends that careers have faced. We also examine what we know about entrepreneurship within a modern career to gain a deeper understanding of entrepreneurship as part of a modern career.

In Chapter Three, we turn to look at theories on identity building in liminal settings and entrepreneurial identity building. Entrepreneurial identity building has been extensively studied, but the focus has primarily been on entrepreneurship and

venture creation, entrepreneurial intention, opportunity recognition and exploitation, and commitment to the venture (Obschonka et al., 2012; Pfeifer et al., 2016; Hoang & Gimeno, 2010). Entrepreneurial identity as part of a career and self-employment has lacked focus. We examine the entrepreneurial identity building research to view the data within this context and discover what new the data provides us in understanding entrepreneurial identity building in liminal settings in between employed work and entrepreneurship.

In Chapter Four, we present the methodology and data of the research. This study is data-driven, and the data play a central role. This is why bringing the data as visible as possible to the audience is important. This study's narrative approach is a central and consistent theme; therefore, Chapter Four makes visible how the narrative approach is carried out in this study.

Chapter Five presents the stories of the individual interim managers as a prerequisite for understanding the analysis of these stories in Chapter Six. Chapter Six consists of narratives built from the stories of the interim managers. The analysis continues to provide us with an understanding of the general-level concepts of identity building in liminal work settings, including the requirement of belonging for identity building, and ultimately, how and through what a solid identity can be constructed in this type of setting. In Chapter Seven, we conclude and synthesize the findings of this study and its contributions.

## 2 Modern career in the liminal work-life

### 2.1 Making sense of our careers

A career has an established definition: the unfolding sequence of a person's work experiences over time. This can be viewed as a sequence of jobs and positions representing *the objective career*, but even more as the work-related experiences of the individual, representing *the subjective career* (Hall, 2001). The focus of research on careers has, over the decades, reflected the surrounding society and its key areas of interest. In the 1950s and 1960s, the focus of career research primarily concerned who would become what (Hall, 2001); one might say the research was centered on the needs of society at the time. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the focus shifted to the individual – first within the context of the organization and then, in the 21st century, to the individual (Hall, 2001).

Career construction theory focuses on the interpretive and interpersonal processes of an individual through which they construct themselves, make sense of their careers, and build direction for their career. The theory is strongly grounded in social constructionism, and on how individuals construct representations of reality (Savickas, 2005). According to social constructionism, reality does not exist as such, but we construct the reality through social processes. The theory views careers from a contextualist perspective and finds career development being driven more from adaptation to environment instead of the persons inner structures. (Savickas, 2013). Language is essential for career construction theory, as language is the tool that enables the subjective reflexivity of an individual in creating a self, forming an identity, and constructing a career (Savickas, 2013). As Savickas (2013) puts it, *stories carry the career*. What is essential in career construction theory is that through this self-reflection, the self recognizes and creates itself, becoming filled with stories from lived experiences. However, the self and the stories accompanying them, with their inherent meanings, are culturally shaped, socially constructed, and narrated through language (Savickas, 2013). Sensemaking is a process that people use to clarify reality that includes unexpected elements, helping one mitigate ambiguity and create order from confusion (Paasio, 2022). Sensemaking is always social, even when making sense of oneself, as the self is always embedded in a social

context influenced by the presence of others. Sensemaking connects seemingly separate events, actions, people, and places together (Paasio, 2022; see also Klein et al. 2006; Weick, 1995).

The concept of the self has been viewed quite differently throughout history, reflecting the social and cultural characteristics of the times. McAdams (1995) created a tripartite model of the self in which the self can be viewed as an object, a subject, or a project (Savickas 2013). The self as an object – an actor – was an efficient way to match individuals to occupations, as the central question was an objective view of person–environment-fit. The self as a subject – an agent – emerged later from views about self-discovery and self-actualization. This aligns well with the bureaucratic structure of a career in which goals are set, and individuals climb the ladder of success within an organization. Following the shift to the digital information society, in which it is typical for people to no longer have long careers at one company, temporary work has increased, people change companies more frequently, and work is more project-based. From this perspective, the self can be viewed as a project. People in an insecure environment need to be flexible and maintain or develop capabilities that make them employable (Savickas, 2005; Savickas, 2013). As Savickas (2013) puts it, “Rather than make plans, individuals must prepare themselves for possibilities.”

These societal changes require a reconceptualization of careers. In career construction theory, careers are viewed as stories that individuals tell about their work lives. Careers are not seen as progressing up or down the ladder. Since individuals can no longer bind their careers to these traditional ladders, they need to find subjective meaning in their careers and the choices they make during their work life (Savickas, 2013). A career can be viewed from an objective point of view in which the individual is an actor; in this view, the career is constructed from the sequences of positions during one’s working life. From the subjective point of view, the individual is an agent, and the focus is on the strivings and adaptations of the individual as they pursue their occupational choices. A career can be viewed as a meaningful story that one builds from their experiences through self-reflexivity (Savickas, 2005; Savickas, 2013). This research examines the career from a subjective perspective but acknowledges that the objective perspective on careers influences one’s subjective point of view, as the objective career reflects the values and norms of the society and culture in which we live. The subjective career perspective is highly individual, as the narrative conveys the individual’s uniqueness, choices, and sense-making. Individuals make choices as they select and organize events and experiences into their career story (Savickas, 2013). This selection and organizing can change over time, as well as the meanings one gives to events and experiences can change over time. Upcoming events change the meaning of the events of the past. One can never return to the moment when the meaning was

different. In meaning-making and storytelling, not only do past events shape the meanings given, but upcoming events also shape the meaning. Later experiences can change the story and its meanings; the story itself, like the self, is living and ever-changing.

In constructing a coherent understanding of one's career and the choices an individual has made, an important phase to recognize is the period between decision-making and the decision's implementation, known as a period of dissonance reduction (Festinger, 1957). The period is used in social psychology to describe the period when an individual attempts to reduce his or her internal conflicts regarding the unchosen option and its attractive aspects, for example, when choosing between two jobs. During this time, the individual builds their mind and a coherent story about their career choices by highlighting the positive aspects of the chosen option and the negative aspects of the unchosen option. This is a form of storytelling – a method for making sense of the decisions one makes. (Festinger, 1957)

A career as such does not imply any success, failure, or advancement (Hall, 2001). Despite this, our culture tends to assign a value to a career through comparison with other careers and the various stages of the career. Much career research has focused on these factors: success, failure, and career advancement. This comparison can be considered a reflection of the objective career and the norms that are culturally set for careers. Typically, career success is viewed as deriving from a person's organizational position, salary growth, or promotions between positions. From this perspective, a career could be evaluated from the outside through some publicly observable factors (see Hall, 2001). These observable factors of objective career success reflect the deeply ingrained values of the surrounding society and reflect shared social understandings about social roles and official positions (Arthur, Khapova & Wilderom, 2005).

However, as the values of the society and individuals are diverse, the career has a very personal and subjective meaning for each individual (Hall, 2001). What constitutes an event in a career depends on one's subjective understanding, as any work, paid or unpaid, over time can constitute an integral part of a career (Hall, 2001). The significance of events differs among individuals, so the construction of a career is highly subjective as certain events may not be considered part of a career for some, while for others, the same events could play a significant role. This suggests that career success can take on highly different positions from the individual's perspective. As career success is considered an outcome of the experiences from one's career, relying on the accomplishment of desired outcomes (Arthur, Khapova & Wilderom, 2005), which vary significantly between individuals, career success can never be fully compared or examined from the outside. To understand careers, career movements, and experienced career success, careers need to be viewed from the individual's perspective as a unique and deeply personal path.

The subjective career and its understanding are built through the values, attitudes, and motivations of the individual (Hall, 2001); since these change throughout life, the experienced subjective career also changes over time. The cultural and social structures shape one's sense-making of one's career, and this sense-making is never totally free from these structures. The subjective view of one's career is not static either; the events, experiences, and career success within one's career are continually interpreted and reinterpreted (Arthur et al., 2005). This influences one's subsequent decision-making regarding career choices in pursuit of future success (Weick, 1996). One's perspective on what they consider career success varies depending on the events and lived experiences. As Arthur et al. (2005) highlight, a career never occurs in a vacuum; rather, context and external factors, such as job opportunities, significantly shape the career and career success.

## 2.2 The individually shaped career

Traditional hierarchy-emphasized career research has faced difficulties in explaining careers and career success in our times, as hierarchies have flattened, and as careers no longer typically occur within a single organization (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996). The new psychological contract that Rousseau (1995) presented, which concerns the psychological relationship between employers and employees, significantly influenced the shift in mindset regarding the traditional employment relationship. In this new psychological contract, the parties to the employment relationship hold different subjective assumptions about the relationship, which are based on the individual's subjective beliefs. This new psychological contract is more individual and flexible, reflecting less security but more autonomy for the individual in the employment relationship. This shift towards a more individualized work life over the past few decades has substantially impacted career research, with a corresponding shift towards more individualized views on careers. One of these more individual-centric views of the career is the theory of the boundaryless career, which shifts the individual's focus from organizational goals to personal goals (Arthur, Khapova & Wilderom, 2005). Originally, Arthur (1994) introduced the concept of a boundaryless career three decades ago. Although the concept has evolved and been questioned over the years, something essential is captured within it. The concept of a boundaryless career shifts the focus of goal-setting; it is no longer about how the individual can facilitate achieving the company's goals, but how the company can advance the fulfilment of the individual's goals. A more boundaryless attitude towards one's career encourages the development of meta-competencies that facilitate easier mobility between employers (Hall, 2001). The traditional dependence on an organization changes more towards independence from these organizations (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996). Individuals are building a portfolio of

their work, consisting of different types of paid, unpaid, and voluntary work (Clinton et al., 2006). However, research on changes in new types of employment and careers has primarily been conducted within Western and industrialized countries (Baruch & Wardi, 2016).

The boundaryless career has been defined as “sequences of job opportunities that go beyond the boundaries of single employment settings” (DeFilippi & Arthur, 1994). Sullivan and Arthur (2006) distinguish between physical and psychological mobility, which equally reflect the different movements within a career. Physical mobility refers to the actual movements and transitions within a career; these transitions can occur between jobs, organizations, occupations, industries, and employment patterns such as unemployment, employment, and self-employment. Psychological mobility, in turn, refers to an individual’s psychological orientation towards making these transitions (Sullivan & Arthur, 2006). Briscoe and Hall (2006) discuss boundaryless career orientation, which encompasses a boundaryless mindset, a preference for working with people beyond one’s organization, and a mobility preference, meaning a desire to move between different employers. However, the scope of what we understand as boundaries needs to be widened. Multiple types of boundaries exist within the concept of a career, and the literature has described numerous psychological, social, and physical boundaries that shape careers (Guest & Rodrigues, 2014). These boundaries are dynamic and can change, becoming weaker or stronger over time in response to changes in the individual or the social environment; their meanings can also evolve (Yao et al., 2014).

The non-linear career paths that boundaryless careers entail greatly enable individuals to create a career based on their preferences (Guan et al., 2019). This type of career offers opportunities to learn, experiment, and develop new competencies, construct new identities, acquire new resources, and build networks (see e.g. Guan et al. 2019) However, boundaryless careers can also have negative effects (e.g. stress or work–life conflicts). Frequent changes in jobs, social relationships, work environments, and family life can be risky, as they require significant time and resources and can therefore negatively affect one’s career (Guan et al., 2019). The boundaryless career somewhat reflects neoliberal free market thinking and individualism at the expense of collective responsibility and organizational communities (see e.g. Arnold & Cohen, 2008). Boundaryless careers are associated with positive aspects, such as personal freedom, autonomy, and self-determination, but also have negative sides, including precarity, insecurity, and self-fragmentation (see e.g. Hoyer & Steyaert, 2015; Kalleberg, 2011; Loacker & Śliwa, 2016). There is a risk that through self-employment and portfolio careers, the boundaryless career can also create isolation (See e.g. Fleming 2017).

Inkson (2008) has argued that it is not so much about boundarylessness as if the boundaries would have vanished, but about individuals crossing these boundaries

more and increasingly moving between organizations. To understand career construction and identity construction in modern work-life, both are equally relevant. Boundaries express distinctions, and these distinctions are necessary for the development of both career and identity. Simultaneously, the blurring of the boundaries complicates identity construction and shapes career construction. However, boundaries never just vanish but typically once one boundary has disappeared, another one rises elsewhere (Inkson et al., 2012). Inkson et al. (2012) describe boundaries serving different roles: as constraints, meaning restricting possibilities; as enablers, meaning facilitating career development; and as punctuators, meaning structuring career development. When liminality – the “being-in-between” – becomes permanent, it becomes difficult for the individual to register the transitions or notice the progression, as the boundaries become blurry, making it unclear whether any boundaries were crossed (Budtz-Jorgensen et al., 2019). Budtz-Jorgensen et al. (2019) claim that this results in individuals constantly acquiring new competencies, roles, projects, and experiences. They claim in the critique that in the discussions about boundaryless careers, some objective and crossable boundaries are assumed to exist, or the boundaries are objectively absent, and that the actors subjectively construct them. However, they state that liminality occurs when these boundaries are neither absent nor present, but individuals find them ambiguous and unclear.

In our contemporary work life, some boundaries have become increasingly blurred over recent years. One of these boundaries is the traditional division between work and private life. A shift has occurred towards employees investing their private lives in their work, with work time spilling into private life, making it difficult for individuals to keep these worlds separate (Budtz-Jorgensen et al., 2019). Employees find themselves somewhere in between – not clearly working, nor clearly not working. Another previously clear boundary has been the one of an employee and a manager – roles that a structured hierarchy in the organization clearly distinguished earlier. As organizations have become more decentralized, these clear organizational boundaries have become less distinct than they once were (Budtz-Jorgensen et al., 2019). The abandonment of these hierarchical principles is seen to enable flexibility and mobility, but it can also create confusion, as an employee may not have a clear idea about how to advance to the next level and navigate between formal constructs (Budtz-Jorgensen, 2019). Without this clear understanding, individuals can find themselves feeling aimless (Arnold & Cohen, 2008). It is possible to argue that the division between employment and entrepreneurship has become more ambiguous, as new ways of working between the two have emerged. Organizations seek entrepreneurial individuals who adopt a more self-directed way of working and are committed to ongoing development. These new requirements for work shape our understanding of the boundaries between employed work and entrepreneurship.

Three types of competencies have been suggested to be essential in managing the boundaryless work-life: 1) *knowing why* you are doing what you are doing, 2) *knowing how* you are doing it, and 3) *knowing whom* you are doing it for. The knowing why refers to understanding and maintaining one's motivation and constructing one's identity, knowing how refers to developing the necessary skills and expertise, and knowing whom refers to building relationships and reputation (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994; Arthur et al., 1995; Guan et al., 2019). This has also been constructed as part of "the intelligent career" (Arthur, 1994).

The agentic perspective on boundaryless careers highlights the actions and capabilities of individuals to voluntarily and easily cross physical and psychological boundaries. However, in boundaryless career research, it has been acknowledged that contextual factors also play an important role in an individual's career transitions, such as demographic background and industrial characteristics (Guan et al., 2019). The reasons behind the boundaryless career also play a role, as it can be due to a forced situation, the absence of other possibilities, or a voluntary choice (Guan et al., 2019). According to Feldman and Ng (2007), voluntary career mobility is more typical of professionals, technicians, or managers who possess the skills, competencies, and resources necessary for these changes.

The boundaryless career is a widely used concept when discussing careers in the modern work-life, but other concepts have also been introduced. The concept of a protean career is based on Hall's (1996, 2001) work, which focuses on individual career management and the psychological success that stems from it, differentiating it from the traditional career development by an organization. Hall's (1996) protean career concept offers greater mobility similar to boundaryless career thinking, but it focuses more on the whole-life perspective of a career. A protean career perspective involves a value-driven attitude and a self-directed approach to career management (Briscoe & Hall, 2002). Protean attitude individuals allow their personal values to guide their careers and decision-making rather than allowing, for example, the organization's values to drive their careers. They take an independent role in directing their careers (Briscoe et al. 2006). This reflects what Rousseau (1995) describes as the shift from traditional, long-term, relational-based psychological contracts between organizations and individuals to more short-term, transactional-based contracts. A person's psychological contract is more focused on themselves than on their relations within organizations. In the world of protean careers, organizations and workers must acknowledge that the other party will hold on to the relationship just as long as its immediate needs are being met. This is significant because longer-term employment relationships tend to be more profitable for the organization in the long run (Hall, 2001). Hall (2001) suggests that organizations cannot "manage" people's careers like before, but organizations must contribute to

the individual's career building and provide opportunities, flexibility, and the resources to help one develop themselves and to be in control of their own careers.

## 2.3 Entrepreneurship within the modern career

One of the strongest boundaries in our work-life is that between employed work and entrepreneurship. For long, entrepreneurship research has focused on new venture founding as an end state, with interest in the one-way transitions towards entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurship has typically been viewed as a distinct career choice, separate from the broader range of career choices (Burton et al., 2016). Thus, entrepreneurship research has focused primarily on entrepreneurship as the end-state career choice (see e.g. Townsend et al., 2010). However, just as some remain entrepreneurs their entire lives once having entered that path, others find that entrepreneurship is just one phase in their careers (Hytti, 2011).

Transitions to entrepreneurship and self-employment typically follow paid employment (Sorensen & Fassiotto, 2011), and many individuals return to paid employment from entrepreneurship for various reasons (see e.g. Wennberg & DeTienne, 2014). Just as there are multiple careers that entail entrepreneurship, there are also multiple paths to entrepreneurship and multiple types of entrepreneurship. Most entrepreneurs do not emerge directly from schools but from existing organizations (Sørensen & Fassiotto, 2011) and transition from employed work to entrepreneurship for myriad reasons. People can start their careers as entrepreneurs but transition to employed work at some point for various reasons. A person's motivation to pursue entrepreneurship can change over time, and entrepreneurial intentions can vary across different phases of one's career. (Marshall & Gigliotti, 2020) Mobility in general, and mobility towards entrepreneurship in particular, concerns not only people's preferences regarding their present opportunities but also their strong reaction to the timing of these opportunities, the arrival of entrepreneurial opportunities, and the possibilities for advancement within paid employment (Sorensen & Sharkey, 2014).

Entrepreneurship has been viewed as "an absorbing state" rather than "a transient state" (Burton et al., 2016), implying that once absorbed, there is no turning back. However, this is not the full picture; it is mainly only a narrative. Entries into entrepreneurship have been extensively studied using the frame of push and pull dichotomy (see e.g. Hytti 2010). The same frame has been used in career research. However, this dichotomy is not black and white. It is never clearly one or the other but push and pull factors are typically present in all person's career moves; they just have different weights (Hytti, 2010). In Hytti's (2010) research on three female entrepreneurs, the boundaryless career discourse was an integral element in their entrepreneurial stories. They mirrored their previous career history and future

possibilities in the decision-making regarding entry into entrepreneurship. As Hytti puts it, not the boundaryless but the boundaries they faced in their employment facilitated their step towards a career as an entrepreneur. A career is not merely constant progress up the ladder of the organizational hierarchy, but careers and entrepreneurship, as one phase in their career, can be considered a tool for self-realization.

Typically, entrepreneurship has been considered insecure while waged work has been perceived as secure; however, this perception has been questioned, as risk is present in both (Hytti, 2005, 2011). According to Marshall and Gigliotti (2020), a boundaryless mindset will likely lower the perceived risk of entering entrepreneurship and provide self-confidence in the ability to transition between employed work and entrepreneurship. However, the interaction between entrepreneurship and other stages and transitions in life (e.g. gender and family circumstances) has been given scant attention (Burton et al., 2016).

Research on entry into entrepreneurship has primarily focused on one's personal characteristics, particularly their intentions. The study of entrepreneurial intentions typically leans towards Ajzen's (1991) theory of planned behaviour or to Shapero and Sokol's (1982) entrepreneurial event model. The central theme in these models is that intentions towards entrepreneurship are driven by an individual's attitudes towards the entrepreneurial behaviour. Although personal characteristics may influence some individuals' career choices, career orientations are not fixed but evolve during one's career through work and life experiences (Rodrigues et al., 2013). Intention-based models of entrepreneurship, in this sense, overlook the role of career experiences in explaining why one enters or does not enter entrepreneurship (Townsend et al., 2010). However, the research has treated entrepreneurship as somewhat isolated from other aspects of work life; in this context, when concentrating on the differences regarding entrepreneurship compared to other career moves, the understanding of what is similar is often overlooked (Burton et al., 2016). In this sense, boundaryless and protean career orientations place a greater focus on the individual decision-making processes regarding their career moves (Tams & Arthur, 2010).

Protean career orientation has an individualistic view that relies strongly on individual motivation in achieving career success (Gubler et al., 2014). People with a protean orientation are more driven by their own value systems than those of others (Briscoe et al., 2006). Entrepreneurship can provide a path for them to achieve a career that expresses their own values. Entrepreneurship as a career move can be more intriguing for someone with a boundaryless orientation, as they tend to discard boundaries and constraints. Similarly, a protean orientation with a high self-direction attitude strengthens these, reinforcing the capability to move across employment boundaries (Marshall & Gigliotti, 2020). Someone with a boundaryless career

orientation is not dependent on the typical boundaries of career thinking within wage-employed settings, which can entail desirability and be a driver towards entrepreneurial activities. What is typical of boundaryless career orientations is that they are characterized by autonomous mindsets, promoting motivation to breaking away from traditional organizational and employment careers (Marshall & Gigliotti, 2020).

Studies have shown that there are numerous employed-work experiences that can positively influence and increase the possibility for entering entrepreneurship, such as small business or start-up experiences, industry experience, workplace colleagues, bureaucracy within the workplace, cultural fit, and job satisfaction (See e.g. Marshall & Gigliotti 2020). However, when examining one's career from a constructionist perspective, most individual experiences, whether from work-life or other aspects of life, shape the narrative one builds about their career; therefore, most experiences shape how one orients towards entrepreneurship. Additionally, organizations can significantly influence individuals' entrepreneurial orientation by empowering them, promoting autonomy, and fostering a sense of accountability. These experiences will likely empower people to pursue more entrepreneurial careers, especially when individuals already hold boundaryless and protean orientation elements (Marshall & Gigliotti, 2020). According to Marshall and Gigliotti (2020), the longer one's tenure in a waged-work position, the more embedded they become in the organization, which reduces their influence on entrepreneurial intentions. As Marshall and Gigliotti (2020) describe, the interesting question is perhaps not who will enter entrepreneurship but why some people decide to leave their previously desired careers to pursue entrepreneurship.

Even the "entrepreneurial" personal characteristics or boundaryless and protean orientation towards career are not always sufficient to direct one towards entrepreneurship. Entry into entrepreneurship can take some time for these individuals as they acquire the skills, experiences, and knowledge necessary to succeed in entrepreneurship (Marshall & Gigliotti, 2020). Entrepreneurship is not always a destination but a bridge between different career options (Burton et al., 2016). As Burton et al. (2016) highlight, entrepreneurship can be a transition itself. It can be entered as the best available option at that point and left when other opportunities arise.

## 2.4 The modern career of an interim manager

An interim manager is a professional of "being in-between". They are temporary in the organization, and their role is neither in nor out, but somewhere in between, creating an interesting set-up for the way of working. An interim manager provides effective leadership when a company faces unexpected or otherwise rapid changes.

In such situations, a gap in leadership occurs that needs to be temporarily and quickly filled (Woods et al., 2020). An interim manager is a highly experienced professional leader with great knowledge of their area of expertise (Goss & Bridson, 1998). They work for the client company for a limited period to conduct and implement a complicated project, manage a crisis, or fill a critical position in the company (Woods et al., 2020). Interim assignments typically involve gap management, critical vacancy, crisis management, and turnaround or change and transition management (Woods et al., 2020).

An interim manager typically works for a company for a period ranging from a few weeks or months to over a year (Institute of Interim Management, 2023; Fisher et al., 2024). An interim manager comes from outside the company and has the mandate to plan and execute the project or role. An interim manager holds a mandate to make decisions. In comparison to traditional consultation, interim manager also executes and makes decisions, and the role is quite similar to what it would be if the work would be performed by an employed director. Differences arise from the pre-set temporary time spent at the organization and from the limited sense of belonging to the organization (Bruns & Kabst, 2005; Vorst, 2009).

Interim managers have strong experience in the work they are coming to perform, meaning they can rapidly take over the work and start producing value from day one (see e.g. Woods et al., 2020). Typically, they are over-competent for the work in their interim assignments, managing the fast takeover of the role and producing high-quality work from day one (Vorst, 2009). They must be highly focused, experienced, and mature enough to handle any type of situation and accomplish tasks effectively (Vousden, 2002). Their liminal state in the organization enables them to better use and transfer the knowledge they have gained from previous assignments (Rubin, 2024). One benefit from using an interim manager in a challenging situation where difficult decisions need to be made is that the interim manager does not have their own interest at stake and does not have very tight bonds to the organization, and, therefore, can look at the situation more objectively (Dźwigoł, 2020; Jas, 2013).

Interim management provides positive possibilities for individuals. As careers have evolved from traditional, long-term commitments in one organization to more scattered and shorter-term commitments across multiple organizations, roles, and tasks, this change can facilitate new career paths and transitions between career phases. Interim management offers exciting new opportunities for experienced professional leaders who typically have extensive experience in leadership and specialist roles across various organizations.

Interim managers have somewhat different motivations for their careers than permanent managers. Just as in any work, an interim manager can be in interim management for several reasons. Goss and Bridson (1998) suggested in their study

that interim managers can be motivated by having no other choice, with interim management being the best possible solution for that particular moment or a preferred career option. In Boyne and Dahya's (2002) study, they argued that interim managers pursued their own interests as they carefully selected their assignments; however, they also had prosocial motivations aimed at improving organizations and providing excellent services. Interim manager assignments can enhance a career as an interim assignment can allow one to test the role before applying for it permanently. Interim management is also a way to reorient individuals' skills or serve as a stepping stone for career development. (Fisher et al., 2024) Interim management can entail accelerated knowledge acquisition and learning, as well as the ability to leverage their expertise and capabilities (Browning & McNamee, 2012).

In Finland, where this research and its data collection occur, interim managers mainly work through two possible arrangements. First, they can fulfil their interim manager assignments as independent entrepreneurs who typically employ themselves through their own companies and undertake interim assignments. Many can do consultation work for other clients as side assignments, but since interim assignments are typically close to full-time, most of their time is spent on the main assignment. Second, interim managers can be employed by a company that acts as a mediator between interim managers and client companies. In this case, however, the interim managers are employed by their employer company; they are not self-employed entrepreneurs. However, the primary way of working as an interim manager is as an independent entrepreneur, which is the context of this research. These entrepreneur interim managers are performing the work, selecting the customers, and determining the terms of the assignment independently. This setting offers a unique perspective on new ways of working from the individual's perspective, as they are, in many ways, situated "in-between" and work in a role not well known to the audience. It brings possibilities but is not entirely unproblematic for the individual. These new ways of working *in between* require a great deal from one's identity work.

# 3 Identity building in between entrepreneurship and employed work

## 3.1 Building identity in liminality

Identity refers to the question of “Who am I?” and is commonly understood to comprise of personal identity, which is the individual’s core conception of self (Ashforth, 2001), and of social identity, referring to individual’s membership in social groups (Oldmeadow et al., 2003). Social identity is built from “those aspects of an individual’s self-image that derive from the social categories to which one belongs, as well as the emotional and evaluative consequences of this group membership” (Hornsey, 2008). Professional role identity is one sub-category of social identities, referring to individual’s self-definition as a member of a profession and enacting this professional role (Ibarra, 1999). The attributes, beliefs, values, motives, and experiences that shape how this professional role is defined influence work-related identity building (Ibarra, 1999). It has been argued that identity building and the question of “Who am I?” are also crucial in the entrepreneurial process (Fauchart & Gruber, 2011; Mathias & Williams, 2018; Powell & Baker, 2017). A social constructionist perspective of the world strongly attaches identity to the features of what one identifies with, meaning the identity of something or someone is built with the features we attribute to them. These features are not positivistic, real-life features but are given to them through our social and cultural discourse, which can vary among cultures, groups, and individuals (Burr, 2015). Our identities are constructed in the discourses within our culture. In this way, identities are fluid, as they have the ability to change (Burr, 2015).

Social identities are socially defined, and each social identity has its specific norms that one must adopt and act upon to be accepted as a member of that group. This can result in some social identities being incompatible or even in conflict (Chasserio et al., 2014). For example, entrepreneurial identities can clash and intersect with other professional roles and identities, or with other social identities that a person holds (Mmbaga et al., 2020); these alternative identities can influence the behavior of the individual as entrepreneur (Elkina, 2024). The attempt to

combine the entrepreneur's role with other social and professional roles that are not fully compatible with the entrepreneur's role can cause identity conflict (Nielsen & Gartner, 2016; Demetry, 2017).

In multiple identity situations, identity construction is influenced by the centrality of a particular identity (e.g. entrepreneurial identity), which refers to the importance one attaches to the identity and its salience– the readiness of the individual to act on that identity (Murnieks et al., 2014). According to Pratt and Foreman (2000), an individual can adopt different strategies to manage multiple identities, including deletion, compartmentalization, aggregation, and integration. By blending these different identities, one can construct some type of hybrid identity (Kozlinska et al., 2023). Notably, one important dimension of identity work is drawing the lines and optimizing between personal and professional identity (Kreiner et al., 2006).

Provisional identities are identity experiments that become established and internalized if the individuals find them successful (Ibarra, 1999; Ibarra & Obodaru, 2016). Identity can also be in a transitional phase; in this transition, identity work can serve as a conceptual bridge between a no-longer-valid prior identity and a still-ambiguous new identity (Clark et al., 2010). Identity work is an ongoing process in which individuals confirm, maintain, alter, and evolve their identity (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). Identity involves the sense-making of oneself and self-reflection on social identities and discourses (Elkina, 2024). Identity is constructed in a dialogue between the self and its context, which is negotiated through the meanings attributed to things (Beech, 2008). Individuals create self-narratives that can consist of several fragmented selves, and these desirable selves may be unclear and depend on the context (Costas et al., 2009). These possible selves can be ideal and wished-for identities, or they can be the opposite: “non-me” positions. These possible selves are elaborated in a sense-making process (Beech, 2008). According to Weick (1995), sensemaking is triggered by one's inability to confirm oneself. Therefore, sensemaking helps build an understandable identity, and identity and sensemaking are closely connected. Identity answers the question of “Who am I?” whereas sensemaking is the “process through which individuals make meaning of novel, unexpected or equivocal experiences” (see Elkina, 2024), which aims to answer “What's the story here?”

When novel, unexpected, or equivocal experiences emerge, identity can face disruptions, and one may find oneself in a liminal state. Liminality is considered a state of ambiguity and uncertainty – of being in between and betwixt different states (Turner, 1970; Beech, 2011). Liminality offers a lens through which the analysis of ambiguity, insecurity, and precariousness is possible in the modern world (Söderlund & Borg, 2018). Arnold Van Gennep (1960) originally introduced the concept of liminality; his focus was on the rites of passage that occur when a person leaves one

social group for another. Van Gennep described this movement as consisting of three stages: *separation* (preliminal), *liminal* (transitional), and *incorporation* (postliminal). On a general level, liminality is a subjective state in which individuals find themselves being in between and betwixt between different positions (Ybema et al., 2011), which can result in challenges in creating coherent professional identities (Bamber et al., 2017; Söderlund & Borg, 2018). Liminality is a state of renewal and re-self-creation; however, it is also a state of insecurity and ambiguity. Liminality can be seen as a picture of our times since liminality can become a more continuing state than a passing phase (Czarniawska & Mazza, 2003; Johnsen & Sørensen, 2015); this constant becoming can be considered a reflection of the worker in the neoliberal world, where one must constantly reinvent oneself (Sennett, 1998).

Liminality is also a creative space, as it is more of an “anti-structure”, where, according to Turner (1970), the focus is not on destroying the old but on creating a space of possibility. The liminal is not bound by the customary, creating a creative space of temporal experimentation (Muhr et al., 2019). This state of creativity and possibility is also stressful due to the loss of identity and high levels of internal conflict (Turner, 1974). Liminality can help us comprehend the process of identity work and understand the “becoming” (Elkina, 2024).

In the liminal state in which identity is being renewed, individuals need to relinquish the old and embrace the new (Conroy & O’Leary-Kelly, 2014). In research, liminality is considered a temporary transition during which an identity becomes anew, changes, and is remodified; however, it can also be a more longitudinal phase of ambiguity (Beech, 2011). Liminality can also become permanent (see e.g. Beech 2011) or a “limbo”, which, again, is not a positive and creative space but an unsettling and disruptive one without a clear way out (Bamber et al., 2017). Drawing from critique towards the boundaryless career concept, Budtz-Jorgensen et al. (2019) introduced a concept of the liminal career, which they suggested would occur when the normal career within an organization becomes “betwixt and in between”. They argued that the liminal career is captured in situations with a lack of clear categories, trajectories, and schemes towards which to structure a career path. In a liminal state, individuals lack social markers to define themselves (Budtz-Jorgensen et al., 2019). Boundaries are crucial for identity construction because identities must rely much on belonging to social groups. Categorization is central for human thinking and sensemaking; without boundaries, or at least if boundaries become blurred, it becomes more difficult to categorize and therefore as well to build identity on, if it is not clear what are the social groups to which belong to.

Budtz-Jorgensen et al. (2019) argue that, in addition to the mainstream positive discourse about flexibility, mobility, and post-bureaucracy, which is associated with the idea of a boundaryless career, liminality also entails ambiguity, anxiety, and

precarity. A liminal career is about freedom and creativity which are essential in contemporary career development but also about the uncertainty and insecurity which create the counterpart of the phenomenon (Budtz-Jorgensen et al. 2019). Within a liminal career, individuals must act according to unknown criteria to move forward formally, constantly moving without a definite destination (Budtz-Jorgensen et al., 2019). In a liminal career without a clear goal or available criteria of how to get “there”, liminality can become a limbo.

Originally, Van Gennep (1960), Turner (1970), and others introduced the concept of liminality. In the original conceptualization of liminality (Van Gennep, 1960; Turner, 1970), the core assumptions of traditional liminality that have been prevalent in the literature were 1) simultaneous role suspension, 2) a finite, bracketed time, 3) social guidance from elders and support from “communitas” of fellow liminars, 4) culturally legitimate narratives to assist one’s sense-making, 5) an obligatory nature, and 6) a progressive outcome. However, the conceptualization of traditional liminality does not align well with the new, non-typical ways of working and modern career types. To better understand liminality in our times, we must turn to alternative formulations of liminality. For this purpose, Ibarra and Obodaru’s (2016) updated conceptualization of liminality offers a new and more suitable perspective for the present day, as they argue that, apart from the previously mentioned core assumptions, modern-day liminality is often less finite, more open-ended, or can even be permanent. In their modern-day conceptualization of liminality, they extended the concept to six renewed assumptions: 1) uncoupled or sequential role and identity suspension, 2) open-ended, extended time period, 3) self-guided process, self-made communitas, 4) incomplete and/or culturally problematic narrative, 5) voluntary nature, and 6) outcome can be uncertain, and multiple outcomes are possible.

From this updated conceptualization, Ibarra and Obodaru (2016) argue that there has been a shift from classic liminality, which consisted of highly institutionalized experiences, to under-institutionalized liminal experiences in which identity work greatly differs from that which has occurred in classical, institutionalized liminal states. They further argued that “the more the liminal experience lacks a clear-cut duration and/or endpoint, prescribed steps, mentors, kindred spirits, or legitimized narratives, therefore, the more it is under-institutionalized”. They argue that under-institutionalized liminal states require more agency from the individual and are, overall, more challenging than more institutionalized liminal experiences. In under-institutionalized liminal states, little guidance or support is provided for identity crafting, and fewer resources are available for making sense of ambiguous feelings, which can lead to increased ambivalence about the situation. Ibarra and Obodaru (2016) refer to being simultaneously “anxious and excited, disoriented and liberated, frightened and elated”. These under-institutionalized liminal experiences leave more

room for individual identity building, despite requiring more from the individual (Ibarra & Obodaru, 2016).

According to Turner (1969), liminality can become “an institutionalized state”, in which transition becomes a permanent condition. Research has shown that liminality can become a permanent state in the modern work-life (Bamber et al., 2017; Czarniawska & Mazza, 2003; Johnsen & Sørensen, 2015). This institutionalized liminality increases the need to exercise the “competence of liminality” (Borg & Söderlund, 2015), which can help the individual benefit from the freedom liminality offers (Reed & Thomas, 2021). In Reed and Thomas’s (2021) study on the liminality of corporate professionals, they found that corporate professionals (e.g. project managers) constructed themselves as liminars, embracing the indeterminacy of their work to remain on the threshold of different identities that enabled them to form and sustain a wide range of relations. It helped them adapt to different environments and work with different people. They experienced that it was part of their work that they constantly changed their identity in relation to what their work required. In this sense, Reed and Thomas (2021) found that liminality is a tool to making sense and maintaining flexible in the cross-draught between clients’ and others’ needs. In fact, embracing liminality was crucial for them to perform well in their work, enabling them to construct a legitimate and sustainable professional identity. As Turner (1982) put it, there is a freedom to be whatever you need to be for others.

### 3.2 Building entrepreneurial identity

In the liminal context of working in between employed work and self-employment or entrepreneurship, the possible entrepreneurial transition does not happen rapidly, but it is for each individual a unique process during which individuals start to act and see themselves as entrepreneurs, and through this practice, assume this role and social identity (Radu-Lefevbre et al., 2021). Prior experiences, present actions, and future aspirations of the individual influence entrepreneurial identity formation (Burcharth et al., 2022). Prior work-related identities are the foundation upon which a new identity is built (Burcharth et al., 2022). For example, entrepreneurship can be triggered by a painful transition from a previous state (e.g. job loss), resulting in an identity threat, grief, and a struggle to make sense of oneself (Petriglieri, 2011; Ashforth, 2001; Shepherd & Williams, 2018). Nascent entrepreneurs in the early stages of forming their entrepreneurial identity draw on the typical prototypes of the entrepreneur (Demetry, 2017). If novel entrepreneurs are not exposed to actual entrepreneur role models, they often rely on the models presented in narratives and stereotypes, which the media typically provides (Down & Warren, 2008). However, these narratives may not provide a comprehensive picture of entrepreneurship, or, in

the case of novel entrepreneurial ways of working, they may not have yet been institutionalized and are thus not being shared.

Building an entrepreneurial identity plays a significant role in achieving legitimacy for one's activity (Hytti, 2005), fostering a sense of belonging (Stead, 2017), and positively distinguishing oneself from others (Shepherd & Haynie, 2009). Entrepreneurial identity influences the amount of time that entrepreneurs dedicate to their ventures (Murnieks et al., 2020), including their level of passion towards that venture (Cardon et al., 2009). The more salient and central an entrepreneurial role identity is, the more likely an entrepreneur is passionate about their venture (Cardon et al., 2009; Murnieks et al., 2014, 2020). A salient entrepreneurial identity can influence entrepreneurial intention, opportunity recognition and exploitation, and commitment towards one's venture (Obschonka et al., 2012; Pfeifer et al., 2016; Hoang & Gimeno, 2010).

Entrepreneurial identity can serve as a psychological resource that helps entrepreneurs fulfil their needs for belonging, self-enhancement, and positive distinctiveness (Shepherd & Haynie, 2009). In most research, entrepreneurial identity is considered a desired identity (Radu-Lefebvre et al., 2021), but it is noted that it may also be a source of negative emotions (Muhr et al., 2019), either through exhaustion from managing multiple identities (Foley et al., 2018) or due to other people in their social networks perceiving entrepreneurship as something negative and undesired (Petriglieri, 2011). Notably, even the concept of "entrepreneurial identity" as a social category is not singular; research has identified many sub-categories of entrepreneurial identity (e.g. "founders", "inventors", "developers", "managers", and "investors") (Wagenschwanz, 2021). All these subcategories have their unique identities that differentiate them. Even these sub-categories seem to miss something relevant regarding the new ways of being an entrepreneur.

Viewing entrepreneurial identity as property reveals that such an identity has a rather stable and distinctive set of attributes (Radu-Lefebvre et al., 2021). It can be seen to reflect entrepreneur role-related characteristics, which are meaningful and self-defining (Mathias & Williams, 2018) and which define the "internalized meanings and expectations associated with a role" (Stryker & Burke, 2000). Although this research finds identity as fluid and ever-changing, it can be argued that viewing identity as a property reflects something essential about the narratives and categories, "the archetypes", one might say, of what being an entrepreneur is. As particular meanings and expectations are assigned to the "entrepreneur", one builds their entrepreneurial identity through this self-categorization as a group member and interprets experiences and behavioral options based on this group membership.

Entrepreneurial identity reflects the internalization of socially held expectations of behavior (Leitch & Harrison, 2016). However, as Shepherd and Haynie (2009) state, the entrepreneurial role is at risk of insufficient feelings of belonging,

ultimately leading to lower well-being, while the need to differentiate from others is typically high in an entrepreneurial role. Individuals need to perceive themselves as somehow different and unique (Brewer, 1991), which is crucial to their psychological well-being. Distinguishing oneself from others fosters a sense of differentiation that is crucial for establishing and maintaining an identity (Brewer, 1991). The idea of entrepreneurship suggests that entrepreneurs are somehow different (e.g. Baker & Nelson, 2005) and identifying as an entrepreneur allows one to distinguish oneself from others (Shepherd & Haynie, 2009). To make sense of “Who am I?”, making sense of “Who am I not?” is equally important (Sveningsson & Alvensson, 2003). The need to belong and distinguish oneself from others overlap and compete, yet both are essential for constructing one’s identity. In the context of entrepreneurship, according to Shepherd and Heynie (2009), the balance can easily be broken for the benefit of distinctiveness. In the case of new ways of working that blur the lines between entrepreneurship and employed work, the need to distinguish oneself becomes somewhat problematic, as the distinction is only partial; one is neither clearly an entrepreneur nor employed, but something in between.

Identity building is a complex process, and although most research views entrepreneurial identity building as a linear process (Radu-Lefevbre et al., 2021), it can be a more nuanced phenomenon. Entrepreneurs can be categorized as aspiring, nascent, and experienced entrepreneurs (Rotefoss & Kolvereid, 2005); however, the identity formation process does not necessarily follow linear and sequential steps, but different individuals experience time and events that influence their identity while building differently in different phases of their careers (e.g. Newbery et al., 2018). As Radu-Lefevbre et al. (2021) highlight, building an entrepreneurial identity is not a one-way street, nor is it fixed or stable; rather, an entrepreneurial identity can be weakened or lost (e.g. in relation to venture failure).

Entrepreneurial identity is produced through dialogues and can be understood as emerging and being realized in the narrative accounts of individuals regarding their past, present, and future (Hytti, 2005). In this sense, entrepreneurial identity always depends on the context (Radu-Lefevbre et al., 2021). The entrepreneurial identity can be regarded as tightly bound to the narratives being told, which, in turn, modify the identity (Hamilton, 2014). Entrepreneurial identity and behavior do not have a strictly causal relationship; instead, they are reciprocal in that entrepreneurial behavior influences entrepreneurial identity and vice versa (Shepherd et al., 2019). Entrepreneurial identity is not only built actively, but the identity’s legitimacy must also be achieved through interactions with other stakeholders (Radu-Lefevbre et al., 2021), such as other entrepreneurs. The need for social belonging is significant in building an identity. Muhr et al. (2019) conclude that, as the entrepreneurial life means always being on the way to somewhere else, it can be considered a permanent liminal state, meaning identities are in a constant flux. Therefore, stable identities

would not exist; for example, the question of “Who is an entrepreneur?” is erroneous in this sense (Gartner, 1988). For the purposes of this research and due to the constructionist and narrative nature of the study, identities cannot be seen as fixed and stable. Identity is always a process that results from reflections between ourselves and the surrounding society. In creating a professional identity, we heavily rely on the *internalized meanings and expectations associated with the role* we wish to adapt to. Even in the search of a *stable professional identity*, the stability of the identity is never fixed or permanent; rather, a stable identity is achieved by being able to relate sufficiently to the meanings and expectations associated with the role we are seeking to fill. However, even a stable identity is constantly in flux, and the identity process is ongoing.

### 3.3 Narrating the entrepreneur

The narratives told about entrepreneurship strongly affect our understanding of entrepreneurship. While entrepreneurship shapes the narrative about entrepreneurship, it is vice versa as well: The narratives told about entrepreneurship also shape entrepreneurship (Audretsch & Lehmann, 2023). In the early 20th century, Joseph Schumpeter, a renowned economist and scholar of entrepreneurship viewed entrepreneurs as innovators. The entrepreneur was seen as a heroic figure who could make major innovations, without whom those innovations would not happen (Casson & Casson, 2014). The entrepreneur was and remains, in this grand narrative, the creative destructor (Audretsch & Lehmann, 2023). Entrepreneurship has initially been viewed as an individual activity rather than a collective one due to the myth of the heroic entrepreneur – an individual starting a business and developing it into a global phenomenon (Ratten, 2023).

Entrepreneurship research has perhaps put too much focus on technology-centric entrepreneurship (Radu-Lefevbre et al., 2021); this focus has distorted our view about entrepreneurship and has directed research and general narratives about entrepreneurship towards that, although most entrepreneurship is something else entirely (Prince et al., 2021). The media plays a significant role in providing cultural tools, such as narratives, imagery, symbols, and role models, about entrepreneurs (e.g. Radu-Lefevbre et al., 2021). Again, these perceptions shape the general understanding of what entrepreneurs do and who they are, which also influences the strengthening or weakening of an entrepreneur or an individual wishing to be one. Most of us connect Silicon Valley to technology and start-ups. We connect all three to success and to millions and billions. This can be considered the dominant grand narrative of entrepreneurship of our day. Entrepreneurship has also been, and to some extent still is, perceived as masculine and predominantly associated with men,

mainly because the dominant image of entrepreneurs is often portrayed as masculine and male (see e.g. Marlow, 2002).

Two classic grand narratives about entrepreneurship can be referred to as what Brattström and Wennberg (2022) call “The story of entrepreneurship as a road to salvation” and “The story of entrepreneurship as a means to emancipation”. The story about the road to salvation refers to technological change and progress – how entrepreneurship changes the world and addresses societal challenges (Brattström & Wennberg, 2022). The story about emancipation is about one for whom entrepreneurship is a way to attain self-realization. This emancipation can also be a collective one. These narratives align with the perspectives of the modern, individual career in which the values and goals of the individual are at the centre. Other narratives about entrepreneurship can also be detected, including “from rags to riches” and “progression through adversity”, in which the entrepreneur must overcome significant challenges and obstacles to succeed (Brattström & Wennberg, 2022). However, competitive and parallel grand narratives about entrepreneurship also exist. Those are typically more local; for example, different countries can have their own grand narratives, as Audretsch and Lehmann (2023) highlight. These narratives shape how individuals view entrepreneurship: Does it seem like a tempting possibility? Is entrepreneurship a desirable goal? Do I want to identify as an entrepreneur if it means this in our cultural setting? Do I see myself as an entrepreneur?

Entrepreneurship can be viewed and defined in several ways. To gain a brief understanding of the various approaches to entrepreneurship, the following outlines are provided here. One commonly used context is to view entrepreneurship from the perspective of opportunity recognition and exploitation, which has been the starting point in Shane and Venkataraman’s (2000) definition of entrepreneurship, which is one of the most well-known definitions. Entrepreneurship can also be described as a mindset (Solomon & Mathias, 2020). Moreover, entrepreneurship can be considered a function typical of economic perspectives (Casson & Casson, 2014). An entrepreneur is someone who innovates new, creates new businesses, makes decisions under uncertainty, bears the risks of failure, and earns the fruits of success (Casson & Casson, 2014). This function can occur independently or within an existing organization, and it is attached to an individual; individuals are those who perform the function of entrepreneurship (Carlsson et al., 2013). Prince et al. (2021) have proposed an integrated definition of entrepreneurship in which entrepreneurship is regarded as *a verb, an action*. In their concept, entrepreneurship as an activity can be further broken down, but the main idea is that it is always an action. This leads us to look at entrepreneurship from another angle: entrepreneurship *as a noun, a form, a status, a way of being, or an identity*. Entrepreneurship can be approached fairly from both angles. One way to understand

entrepreneurship is to view it as a labour-force status, distinct from employed work (Sorensen & Sharkey, 2014). This perspective on entrepreneurship draws from the notion that employment is the norm and entrepreneurship deviates from it. We run into problems as we are trying to define employment. This is because the very foundations of employment can be traced to the early 20th century to liberal economic theory by Adam Smith (1937) in which employment was merely a transaction and an exchange relation. This idea was further developed to theories on management. The core of these theories had to do with managing efficiently the labour force. This history and its idea of man is very different from what we view nowadays within management studies but nevertheless, this history weighs and affects the research and definitions of today. It is fair to say that more than our conception about entrepreneurship, perhaps our conception about employment, is outdated. Perhaps the boundaries are not clear anymore, but our history-driven basic conceptions lead us thinking that the division is still clearly there.

Audretsch and Lehmann (2023) call the self-employed not an entrepreneur because they do not have a story to tell: a story about their company, its purpose, goals, and aims. They do not have to convince the audience with their story. However, the self-employed need to have a story for themselves – for their identity and career to become understandable – for it to make sense. They need to convince themselves of their story. If this is the case self-employed, just as well, while intrapreneurship as a phenomenon of entrepreneurship within organizations (i.e. entrepreneurial individuals within organizations who are not the founders or owners of the companies), can be claimed not to be entrepreneurs (Prince et al., 2021). Again, however, we must understand the difference between entrepreneurship as a verb and as a noun. The previous answers to the question “What am I doing?” and can be called *entrepreneurship*, while the latter one answers the question of identity, “Who am I?”. Intrapreneurship can be considered an entrepreneurial activity, but it differs from entrepreneurship in that it does not fulfil the prerequisites of entrepreneurship as a status. As a noun, entrepreneurship encompasses concrete and abstract objects, and boundaries are drawn between entrepreneurship and employed work, with a clear division between the two. Interestingly, for employment, there is no verb, and employment is not only a noun but a status. Or, the verb for employment is to be employed; however, as a verb, it is passive, referring to holding a position rather than engaging in any activity.

The narratives about entrepreneurs influence potential entrepreneurs and their decision-making regarding their life and career choices. However, as Brattström and Wennberg (2022) highlight, these narratives are merely stories told about entrepreneurship; thus, they need to be critically reflected upon. Not all real-life stories lead to the outcomes reflected in these grand narratives about entrepreneurship. Most importantly, if we allow these narratives to guide our

research, we end up repeating and studying the same myths all over again, which will further reinforce them. When the focus is too strongly on the “good”, the stories that are more likely to happen are in danger of not being told because they are not as compelling (Brattström & Wennberg, 2022).

In this research, no single definition of entrepreneurship is applied. This research explores the roles and meanings that entrepreneurship plays in the identity and career building of the interim managers. By focusing on liminality and ways of working that are not clearly entrepreneurship nor employed work but something in between, it is justified not to be fixed with one definition of entrepreneurship in this study. Narratives about entrepreneurship shape individuals’ understanding of entrepreneurship, and, just as well, the unestablished way of working as self-employed shapes the individuals’ understanding of their entrepreneurship.

## 4 Methodology and data

### 4.1 Philosophical foundations to the research

The traditional categorizations and definitions in work life and entrepreneurship are changing in the 21st century. Qualitative research, which can reveal these changes and perhaps formulate the traditional definitions anew, is needed. According to Alasuutari (2011), qualitative research is necessary when culture undergoes changes, and the basic assumptions and traditional categorizations require revision.

The research philosophy sets the foundation for the research design and research strategy. The ontological and epistemological basis of this research is interpretivist and constructionist, according to which reality is understood as subjective and based on perceptions and experiences that may differ for each person and may change over time and context (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016). This research explores the subjective understanding of the research participants to achieve meaningful understanding, which Weber (1922) also refers to as *verstehen* (Heracleous, 2004). From the constructionist perspective, this study is interested in how people interpret and understand social events and settings, and how the changing and individually constructed reality occurs through social constructions such as language and shared meanings (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016).

Characteristic of social constructionism, this research is interested in the production of the data, which happens through language (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016). The attempt is to understand the situation and the related human sensemaking in its full complexity. From a social constructionist perspective, this research acknowledges that multiple possible interpretations exist, which vary depending on the interpreter (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016). No single universal reality exists, but the understanding of the world depends on one's perceptions, connotations, emotions, and motives. All knowledge occurs within a conceptual framework through which individuals describe and explain the world (Schwandt, 2000). The social constructionist approach has gained wider adoption in entrepreneurial research, serving as a counterbalance to the functionalist and positivist approaches and opening up possibilities for new theoretical fields and methodological approaches (Paasio, 2022).

This research takes a critical stance towards taken-for-granted knowledge and does not accept it as such as basic assumptions of the world and of research. This perspective is generally typical of social constructionist approaches. From the social constructionist perspective, this research views the world as subjective and mediated through language, in which knowledge is built through these social processes and language (Burr, 2015). Language is the key to knowledge, and the classifications of language are produced and maintained in a particular place and time through a group of individuals. The concepts through which we tend to understand the world are historically and culturally specific (Burr, 1995). When an individual describes an event, this description is simultaneously a description of the event and part of the event because talk has a constitutive nature (Burr, 2015). Truth and knowledge depend on the time, place, and social interactions between people; no universal objective truths can exist. The goal in this research is to gain deep insight and understanding into how the participants of this study make sense of their world within the studied context.

## 4.2 Research design and data collection

Because of my experience in the field, I knew who to approach to gain insights at the very beginning of the research process, when I was still trying to figure out exactly what I wanted to study. My previous experiences helped me collect data, as I knew how to contact potential interviewees. The central theme in my work would probably not have been designed as part of the research unless I had experienced some confusion about all this during my entrepreneurial journey.

As this study focuses on personal experiences of careers, entrepreneurship, and identity, the data collection needs to focus on the individuals and their perspectives. In-depth interviews were an effective way to explore this perspective. I found that conducting repeated on-time in-depth interviews would fit my research approach (Goyes & Sandberg, 2025). I decided to study the participants' interim manager assignments from start to finish by interviewing the interim manager throughout one assignment, commencing as the assignment began and concluding the interviews when the assignment ended. I wanted to have multiple interviewees, and the initial frame for the number of interviewees was 5–7.

Multiple in-depth interviews conducted throughout an assignment were chosen as a method because they provide insight into the progression of experiences and how actual events and their interpretations affect further decision-making and the interpretation of prior events. This method also deepened the addressed themes, as the occurring themes can be revisited in the upcoming interviews.

All interviewees were chosen so that their assignment was in the beginning when the first interview occurred, and the interviews continued until the end of the

assignment. However, the end of the assignment was not predictable nor was it very clear either when it reached its end. The endings were sometimes surprising and sudden sometimes they were prolonged or dried off slowly. Additionally, the beginnings of the assignments varied, including surprises and mushiness. Despite this, all the assignments were followed approximately from start to finish.

The data covers the life cycle of one assignment, from start to finish, but the data also heavily focuses on retrospective stories about the participants' careers and related events, their families, and other life events. Just as well the interviews are focused on the future. All time aspects – past, present, and future – are discussed.

In search of interviewees, I framed three mandatory pre-conditions for the search:

- 1) The interviewee should be an entrepreneur
- 2) The interviewee should perform interim assignments
- 3) The interviewee should be starting a new interim assignment so that I can follow the assignment from start to finish

These criteria proved to be much more difficult to fulfil than expected. I began searching for interviewees by contacting a few intermediary companies that mediate entrepreneur interim managers to client assignments. I contacted persons already familiar to me. I started the search at the beginning of August 2022, and two intermediate companies had some new starts coming; they contacted these entrepreneurs to ask if they were interested in participating in the research. Both were interested, and their new assignments had either just started or were just beginning, so I quickly moved on and began the interview process with them. The third interviewee was found through a friend of mine who knew a former colleague; this person had just started as an entrepreneur and was performing an interim assignment. I called him, and it turned out that he had just started an interim assignment, and he was interested in participating in the research. I quickly started the first three interview sets in August 2022.

It was a good start, but then the search for interviewees became more complicated. I contacted many people working on interim assignments and close to all the intermediate companies working in the field in Finland, but no new interviewees were found. Interim managers were easily found, but no one had an assignment that was just starting, or the assignments were not clearly interim assignments but consultations. I had to refuse a couple of cases because the intermediate companies had new assignments starting, but they were staffing the positions with people who were working as employees for them or another company; thus, they did not fit my research design. I posted on LinkedIn and asked if there were entrepreneur interim managers starting a new assignment who were interested

in participating in the research. I received numerous contacts; after many discussions, I identified three new interviewees who met the set pre-conditions. Their interviews started in late December 2022 or January 2023. I was satisfied with the number of interviewees, which was six at that point. However, in the first interview, one of the new interviewees mentioned having a friend who had just started a new interim assignment. I contacted her and decided to take one more interviewee, as her situation fit my research design, and she was willing to participate. The final number of the interviewees was then confirmed to be seven. However, I decided to exclude one participant from the research because the interview dates were prolonged so that the assignment had been going on for a while before we could finally conduct the first interview; by then, so much had already happened that the assignment had already ended. I decided not to include it in the dataset since it no longer met the preconditions. As described, my search for interviewees was a combination of the snowball method, direct contact, and social media use.

The research data consist of interviews with these entrepreneur interim managers performed repeatedly during one interim assignment, which lasted from 3 to 9 months. The total number of participants was six, and the number of interviews per interviewee varied from three to five, depending on the length of the interim assignment being followed. Each interview lasted between 30 and 90 minutes. The research data consists only of interviews. No additional data were collected due to the research question and its in-depth focus on individual experiences. The research questions focus on interim managers, as well as their subjective thoughts and understandings of how they make sense of their entrepreneurship and their careers in the context of performing interim manager assignments. This pursued personal view can be particularly well studied through in-depth interviews.

In this research, entrepreneurship and self-employment are discussed without a strong distinction between their meanings. Entrepreneurship is considered a broader concept that encompasses activity, mindset, and way of working, while self-employment refers to the way of working as a solo entrepreneur in this context. This decision not to sharply distinguish between the terms was made purposefully because the studied group of interim managers primarily discusses entrepreneurship, whereas in the literature, this type of work has typically been defined as self-employment or independent work. However, for the study participants, entrepreneurship holds a different meaning for each of them, which they view quite differently. Entrepreneurship can be said to be a unique experience for each person; thus, clearly differentiating the different definitions of self-employment, independent work, and entrepreneurship in this research would be unsuitable in this study, as each participant's definition of their work arrangement and entrepreneurship is unique and subjective. Simultaneously, it is essential to recognize that the definitions we use and how we discuss things shape our understanding of the phenomenon at hand. In the

Finnish language, the original language of the interviews, the three definitions have subtle cultural nuances; therefore, the use of a particular term could have had a different meaning for the participants. The strict differentiation and purposeful use between these three concepts would not have provided value to this narrative study. However, the main term used within the interviews was *entrepreneurship*, referring to all aspects of entrepreneurship for an individual.

The interview question topics described in Appendix 1 were pre-defined, and the purpose of the questions was to encourage the interviewees to talk as much as possible. The questions were more like themes I wanted to talk about with the interviewees. Appendix 1 contains the interview themes and questions. The interviews were originally planned to be semi-structured, with a pre-designed outline of topics and themes, while still allowing for the possibility to vary the wording and order of questions in each interview. The interviews turned out to a blend of semi-structured and in-depth interviews since the themes that were addressed many times in different interviews deepened the understanding of the themes and the stories told. This approach with similar themes emerging in each interview enabled continuous deepening of the theme. Through this process, the semi-structured interviews ultimately evolved into in-depth conversations about the preselected themes, which each participant explored in their own direction by building new themes, events, and experiences. This is where the narrative nature of the research began to clarify. The setup of repeated interviews with specific themes created a setting where their stories began to build depth that would have been impossible had it only been single retrospective interviews. Conducting a series of interviews has been considered an effective method to elicit interviewees to tell their stories; it is also a valuable approach for verifying the internal validity and consistency of the informant's statements (see Elliott, 2005).

One benefit that my experience in the field provided was the sense of connectedness I felt with many of the interviewees. I briefly introduced myself and shared my background when I presented my research. I felt that we connected and established mutual trust rather fast, allowing us to talk openly during the interviews. The first interviews were more formal and mainly followed the pre-set list of themes. Eventually, as the interviews progressed, they became more emancipated, flowing, and natural. The interviews evolved into a more open-ended discussion, and the interviewees began to steer the conversations in their own directions; my participation in the interviews also increased. This perhaps improved the quality of the data, as it enhanced the trust between the interviewee and me, the researcher. My routine was to always to listen the previous interviews before the upcoming one, so I could revisit some interesting events and themes that had been discussed. This allowed us to revisit certain themes and engage in gain richer, more in-depth discussions on these topics.

According to Silverman (2017), enhancing the transparency of interviews, such as by explaining to the study participants the study's purposes, can improve the quality of the interview research. Originally, when searching for participants, the study aimed to focus more on their experienced commitment towards their client assignments and their entrepreneurial endeavours. After data collection and analysis, the focus turned out to be more in the career and identity than in commitment; however, commitment is a constant theme in the interplay between identity, career, and activity. This did not affect the data collection setting because commitment is an important concept in the study of careers. I do not believe it affected the orientation of the participants, as we discussed numerous issues related to their careers, entrepreneurship, and assignments. When I initially contacted my participants, I briefly explained that the theme of this research was to study the perceptions of entrepreneur interim managers of their commitment to their client assignments and their own entrepreneurial undertakings. The participants were immensely interested in my research throughout the interview process; many asked after the interviews had occurred what I had discovered so far, whether had others had similar thoughts, and how their answers had sounded. After each interview, we had a brief discussion about this, but I did not want to reveal so much so that it would affect the upcoming interviews with them in any way. So, I described something on a very general and vague level with them, but my main message was always that I could not yet make any analysis since the interviews were unfinished. A few times, I made a note that the participants in the interviews mentioned something like, "So if you think about the commitment...", and it was clear that in these cases, the information they had received about the study purposes did, on some level, affect some answers because I did not use commitment as a term in the interviews. Silverman (2017) discusses the potential impact that the given information about the research might have on the interviews. Regardless, to gain the participants' trust and facilitate open discussion, I had to provide information about the study's purposes; this factor is something that the analysis must consider.

All the interviews were recorded. After each interview, I listened to the recordings and took notes. This helped me continue the discussion in the next interview with the same interviewee. I generated some new questions and topics for the following interviews based on the previous interviews and notes about them. An external service provider transcribed the recordings after all the interviews with the participant had concluded. I also made notes about the interviews after each interview. The data were at the core of my research; thus, I applied a data-driven approach and did not have any predefined hypotheses to test or a theoretical framework to build the analysis upon. Instead, I relied on induction in the analysis and allowed the theoretical attachment to be created later in the process. Theory in

this research serves as a lens through which the data can be approached and understood.

### 4.3 Data and context

All the participants were highly educated, experienced leadership professionals with a long history in various companies and positions. They had all been working in demanding managerial roles in Finland; some were also abroad. Their positioning as self-employed entrepreneurs differed greatly from that of the precarious self-employed, whose positioning in the labour market might not be as favourable. The participants in this study had extensive networks and considerable social capital. Table 1 presents the participants, their ages, work experiences, length of working as an entrepreneur, experience in interim management, length of the interim assignments studied in this research, the number of interviews per interviewee within this research, and the substantive areas of their professional expertise. More detailed description on the participants can be read from their stories in Section 5.

**Table 1.** Description of the participants in the study.

Name	William	Elena	Werner	Isabella	Seymour	Clarissa
<b>Age</b>	Late 30s	Early 60s	Late 40s	Early 40s	Late 50s	Early 40s
<b>Work experience</b>	+15 years	+35 years	+25 years	+20 years	+35 years	+20 years
<b>Entrepreneurship</b>	A few months	+10 years	+10 years	A few months	Altogether, a few years	A few months
<b>Interim manager experience</b>	First interim assignment	10 years	10 years	First interim assignment	2–3 assignments earlier	First interim assignment
<b>Length of the assignment</b>	6 months	10 months	4,5 months	7 months	3 months	4 months
<b>Number of interviews</b>	4	5	3	4	3	3
<b>Substance of the assignment</b>	Strategy work	IT project management	Financial management	Financial management	Financial management	CEO

All the participants were quite busy, working long hours and having much going on in their free time. The interviews were arranged according to their situations and time schedules. The interviews were conducted live and via Teams in various settings, including restaurants, cafés, cars, offices, and home offices. We drank coffee, had lunch, drove a car, or just sat. The interviews were often cancelled, rescheduled, changed venues, interrupted, and then re-interrupted. However,

eventually all the needed interviews were held and finalized. Some participants spoke more, while others spoke less; some spoke more about their inner thoughts, while others did not at all. Some focused on events, and others on experiences. However, regardless of this variation, the interviews provided a wealth of information, and the data turned out to be rich in descriptions of these participants' experiences and how they make sense of their careers, their entrepreneurship, and their life events.

#### 4.4 The narrative approach

Narratives have long fascinated researchers within the social sciences. Elliott (2005) argues that this is related to the dissatisfaction with rigidly structured research interviews, which fragment individual experiences. Moreover, there has been interest in the notion of the narrative construction of identity – in the idea that identity is shaped through interaction and discourse rather than being something stable and enduring. In 1986, Jerome Bruner described “the narrative mode of knowing” compared to the logico-scientific mode of knowing by arguing that the narrative mode of knowing consists of organizing experiences through a scheme to assume the intentionality of human action. Bruner (1991) continues that in narrative, the key is the *plot* rather than the truth or falsity of the story, and the plot defines the power of the narrative. A narrative method is not a single, specific method but a set of approaches that researchers can use to interpret data (Elliott, 2005). According to Elliott (2005), narratives can be “understood to organize a sequence of events into a whole so that the significance of each event can be understood through its relation to that whole”. Narratives express the meaning of events (Elliott, 2005). Hinchman and Hinchman (1997) define narratives as discourses with a clear sequential order that meaningfully connect events for a particular audience, offering insights about the world and people's experiences of it. Narratives are *chronological, meaningful, and social*. A necessity of causality exists between events under a specific set of circumstances, which the narrative aims to discover. The causality is not universal but particular in this setting (Elliott, 2005).

Even though the concepts of *a narrative* and *a story* are intertwined, there are differences between the concepts as well. Eriksson and Kovalainen (2016) define a story as “*a piece of fiction that narrates a chain of related events or happenings that involve certain characters*”. In comparison to a narrative, which can be defined as “*a textual actualization of a story at a specific time, in a specific context and to a specific audience*” (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2016). Czarniawska (2006) finds their difference in the presentation. In a narrative, the story is given a plot, a logical connection as a set of events or actions is put chronologically together. In this study, a story is referred to as the stories of individuals on their careers, which are told in

chapter 5. A narrative in this study is a plotted construction of these stories, which are told in chapter 6.1.

No standard approach or method exists for the narrative analysis method (Elliott 2005). The narrative method can appear in at least two ways: in the paradigmatic analysis of narratives, the data consist of narratives that are being analyzed. In narrative analysis, which presents the narrative approach of this research, the data consists of other types of material, and the analysis itself ties everything together as narratives (Polkinghorne, 1995). Narrative analysis discovers an understanding of the studied objects (Oliver, 1998). Mishler's (1995) framework for understanding the different approaches to narrative analysis distinguishes between three functions of language that the researcher may be interested in: *content*, *structure*, and *performance* (Elliott, 2005). Lieblich et al. (1998) suggest another typology, who suggest that narrative analyses can be characterized by whether the focus is on *the content* or *the form*.

In the analysis of this research, the interest is in the content of the narrative (see e.g. Elliott, 2005; Riessman, 2008); however, the question of *how* things are told, not only *what* is told, is equally relevant. This has to do with the structure of what is being told and why it is told in this way. Yet another aspect is the *context – cultural and interactional* – in which they are told (Riessman, 2008; Elliott, 2005). The attempt is also to discover the narrative coherence, meaning a narrative is more than just a succession of chronological events; this “configurational” dimension shapes the narrative into a unified whole (Elliott, 2005). Another important aspect in narrative analysis is the social context in which the narrative occurs. The narrative is not only a textual analysis, but it also requires that the story production be situated within a wider context of the negotiated social world (Plummer, 1995). This study employs various narrative analysis tools to uncover the underlying narratives in the stories. No coherent entirety of the process of a “standard” narrative analysis exists; therefore, such can neither be followed in this research. In narrative analysis, the appropriate tools that best serve the attempt to discover the broader narratives must be used.

Narratives are told all the time; they are used to understand our experiences and to make sense of the behaviour of others. Narrative researchers tell stories about how people understand the world. These stories depend on the individual's past as well as current experiences and values, and on who, when, and why the stories are told (Moen, 2006). The key concept is *meaning*. People produce meaning and create order when they tell stories about their experiences (Moen, 2006). According to Moen (2006), narrative research is a constant hermeneutic process in which selected stories are being reinterpreted several times during the research process. Hermeneutics and constructionism share a similar approach towards knowledge as does narrative research. This research can be seen to reflect the hermeneutical method of analysis in which there is a search for central themes in the discourses,

the thematic construction, and thematic interconnections. (Heracleous, 2004). When utilizing hermeneutical analysis in research, the researcher constructs the central themes in the texts and their interrelatedness. The analysis is a process of discovery within the hermeneutical circle, as the interpretation of the materials becomes richer with each round and moves between the whole and the particular (Heracleous, 2004). The hermeneutical method of analysis, as described, can serve as the starting point in narrative research and is intertwined in the analysis.

Narratives are a product of storytelling in which the storyteller connects events together in consequential way. The aim is to create meanings that the storyteller wants their audience to derive from the narrative. The storyteller defines what events are significant and included in the story, as well as how they are selected, organized, connected, and evaluated for the specific audience they are addressing (see Paasio, 2022; Riessman, 2008). According to Riessman (2008), narratives are strategic, functional, and purposeful. Riessman (2008) highlights that stories are always told in a certain context because they are always told at some point in time. The same events might tell a different story had they been told at a different moment in time. Future events and experiences affect the understanding and interpretation of past events. This is why narratives are always unique and most likely to occur only in that particular moment in time as they are being told. The key difference between narrative research and other forms of qualitative analysis is that in narrative analysis, the context of the events is an essential part of the entire account. However, in many other qualitative analyses, the accounts are distilled into increasingly smaller coded units and are separated from their context (Riessman, 2008).

## 4.5 Data analysis

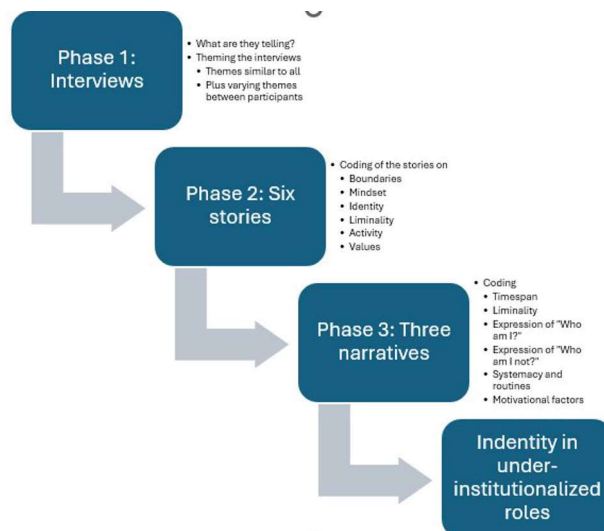
My data analysis began immediately after the interviews took place. Already during my first interview and after it, while I was driving home, I processed a lot about the discussions and what the interviewees had told me. The data analysis spanned a long period, beginning with the first interview taking place. During and after each interview, I created an initial structure of the themes that emerged. Between interviews with the same interviewee, I always listened to the recording of the previous interview and took notes, mainly to further reflect on the questions and themes I wanted to discuss in the next interview, but also to better understand what the interviewee was saying. Since I was personally involved in all the interviews, I mentally analysed the interviews practically all the time.

The formal and systematic analysis work started when I had finalized all the interviews. The transcriptions were made as detailed as possible, recording the delivery of speech in great detail. This decision was crucial because the analysis focused on aspects beyond the narrative's content. A service provider transcribed the

interviews. This was a thoroughly considered and intentional decision, even though it was clear that transcribing the interviews is considered part of the analysis (see e.g. Elliott, 2005). Despite the benefits, all things considered, I decided not to do the transcriptions myself. After receiving all the transcriptions, the formal analysis phase could begin. Altogether, there were 22 interviews, 17 hours of interview recordings, and 302 pages of transcribed text.

The narrative method of analysis does not provide a clear and specific framework for analysis, and there is no single narrative method; instead, the researcher can engage the data's narrative properties in several ways (Riessman, 2005). For example, Elliott (2005) has suggested certain classifications for understanding the different methods and techniques that can be used in narrative analysis, but it is still the researcher's own agenda to find the suitable framework for the analysis that can prevail the essence of the narratives: how the individuals make sense of events and actions in their lives. This chapter provides a comprehensive description of my method for conducting narrative analysis, illustrating the process from data collection to findings. Figure 1 illustrates the process of analysis, followed by a detailed description of its various phases.

**Figure 1.** The data analysis process.



*The first phase of my analysis* involved carefully reading through the interviews multiple times, trying to understand what the participants were talking about. Then I moved on and conducted the initial theming of each individual interview, seeking a more structural approach to “What is going on here?” (Weick et al., 2005). In the first phase of the analysis, I focused on the interviews with individual participants. I

began by reading through the interviews of each participant in the spirit of *close reading* (see, e.g. Duck, 2018) and took notes on the themes discussed. At this point, I did not attempt to find similarities or differences *between* the stories but sought to identify the key themes that each was discussing. Next, I *themed and coded* each single interview separately. The codings varied between participants at this phase of the analysis, as the aim was to discover their unique stories. I completed multiple rounds of coding after the initial theming, and within each round, the coding became increasingly detailed, revealing finer-grained details. After multiple rounds of coding the individual interviews, I examined the series of interviews with one participant and compared the themes and codings between the interviews, aiming to discover both their individual and connecting stories. I made tables to make the themes of the interviews visible. I formed tables that included the main themes discussed in their story. I created tables for each participant's interviews; at this point, the themes varied between the different participants, as their stories were unique, and I wanted to capture them as independent and individual. However, some similar themes arose. All the participants talked about their careers before their entrepreneurship, their entry to entrepreneurship, what role entrepreneurship plays for them, their motivation, their future plans, and their perception towards employed work. These themes were similar to all due to the question setting of the interviews. However, various other themes also occurred in the interviews between different participants. For example, in Table 2, the similarities and differences between the themes of Clarissa and William are visible.

**Table 2.** Example of the themes of the interviews.

#### Themes of Clarissa

- Career before entrepreneurship
- Entry to entrepreneurship
- Entrepreneurship to her
- Employed work to her
- Future plans
- Freedom and independence
- Working hours, well-being and personal life

#### Themes of William

- Career before entrepreneurship
- Entry to entrepreneurship
- Entrepreneurship to him
- Employed work to him
- Future plans
- Providing value
- Communality
- Insecurity
- Well-being

In narrative analysis, it is important not to fracture the events but to build the narrative around the themes that emerge in the discourse. After theming and coding each series of interviews with one participant, I wrote *independent stories* about all the unique individual stories based on the themes that had emerged from the interviews. First, I analysed each participant's story individually. As I had three to five interviews per participant, I viewed the series of interviews for each participant *as a single unit*. This was because they told the same story, only within different moments in time; thus, I found no significance in separating them and analysing the interviews separately. Moreover, the interviews of one participant formed the entirety under analysis. However, although the series of interviews was analysed as one story, I also analysed the separate interviews from the perspective of whether there were discrepancies or something illogical, which could reveal something important.

From the start, I wanted the plot to be central to the story, so I spent a great deal of time considering the order of events and how they would be presented to capture the story's plot and make it visible. From the beginning, I wanted to write the stories in a way that the plot, which was rather easy to discover, would be in place. Each participant had identified a few key themes that frequently appeared in their stories. However, the main difficulty in the writing phase was determining how to present the chronology of the events, the interviews, and the assignment. One key aspect in the entire research design was that I interviewed the participants using an approach consisting of interviews during one interim assignment. This method was important, and I wanted it to show in the analysis as well. For me, it was obvious from the start that the recurring themes were the key to the plot, the stories needed to be gathered around them, and the chronology of the series of interviews was secondary. However, making the chronology visible in the analysis was also important. I ultimately made the chronology as visible as possible in the analysis without it being the main driver.

This phase of analysis, to some extent, followed the idea of thematic narrative analysis (Riessman, 2008). The analysis focused mostly on the content of the stories, meaning "what" was said and what kinds of meanings the participants gave to the events. However, throughout the analysis, I also emphasized asking the data-driven questions that relate to structural narrative analysis, inquiring about "how" this story is told, "why" it is told in this manner, and "to whom" it is told. All these questions reveal the social interaction and the social and cultural context in which the stories are being told (Riessman, 2008). The first phase of analysis resulted in the formation of six stories – individual stories of each participant. In this research, the concept of *a story* refers to an individual interim manager's story, as opposed to the concept of *a narrative*, which refers to the general level narrative underlying the individual stories.

After forming and writing the six stories, I proceeded to *the second phase of the analysis*: analysing the six stories. I themed and coded these stories to make the first attempt to create a framework about what they were discussing on a more general level. I identified some common key themes in all the stories and coded them according to these themes, attempting to discover what the different stories revealed about these themes. In this phase of analysis, all the stories were coded using the same coding. The codes used were 1) Boundaries, 2) Mindset, 3) Identity, 4) Liminality, 5) Activity, and 6) Values. In this phase, I also created tables to make the information about these themes mentioned in the stories visible. The tables were long, consisting of, at best, a few dozen rows per story; however, here I present an example of how the themes were managed.

**Table 3.** Coding of the stories.

	<b>Boundaries</b>	<b>Mindset</b>	<b>Identity</b>	<b>Liminality</b>	<b>Activity</b>	<b>Values</b>
<b>William</b>	"Not a big leap"	"Would be crazy not to try it"	"A stepping stone"	Liberating knowing that this is not final	A possibility presented itself, and he took it	Wanted work to be meaningful
<b>Elena</b>	-	"You just have to manage the risks"	"I've been offered employed work but always said no"	Retiring in a couple of years; how to slow down then	Considering expanding the business when there is time	Careful to not accept unethical assignments
<b>Werner</b>	-	What is promised is done	No intention to return to waged work	Normal not to know how long the assignment lasts	Keeps up with his networks	Wants to provide extreme flexibility for the client
<b>Isabella</b>	"It's okay to be out of work since I just don't invoice"	Professional pride of always doing her work well	Keeps the door open for waged work	Nice to know this one would end	Ideas of growing a business, but now is not the time	At this point of life, more time is needed for family
<b>Seymour</b>	No significance in what the position or title is	If something seems interesting, he takes it	Doesn't care in what form the work is done	"We'll see how the length (of this assignment) turns out then"	Wants to be able to do side assignments	Wants to help companies that help society
<b>Clarissa</b>	"It's easier to draw the boundaries now"	Enjoys constantly entering something new	Wanted to do something that looked like her	In interim work, you know when the timeline ends, while in employed work, the time is unlimited	"I put all my effort to this (assignment)"	Needed to do something else now for the sake of her head

After coding all the stories, I continued with the analysis to understand the main narratives being told. I studied the codings and the stories, and some initial main narratives began to take shape. Then I reread the data to discover the progression of thought within time from start to finish regarding the important themes of 1) entrepreneurship, 2) interim management, 3) employed work, and 4) career. At this point, I relied on traditional pen and paper and started drafting what these central narratives were talking about. I connected the codes in Table 3 with the themes of entrepreneurship, interim management, employed work, and career, discovering the three main narratives the stories were telling. After drafting these three narratives on paper, it was time to write and rewrite them. As I wrote the three narratives, I still returned to the individual stories several times, to the codings, and even to the original transcripts, to see if I was missing something or if I wanted to verify something.

After creating the frame for the narratives, I started writing. My main tool in this analysis phase was interpretative writing. I wrote a great deal, read the writings, took notes on the text, and then rewrote it. The aim was to understand “What is going on here?” (Weick et al., 2005). I used the transcriptions throughout the analysis phase in at least two ways: 1) I reread the transcripts, trying to see if I had missed something important, and 2) I read the transcripts and posed questions about my initial interpretations in the analysis, asking if the transcripts seemed to support my initial interpretations. I returned to the data multiple times, and the analysis evolved with each round. The analysis was an iterative process in which the interaction between the data and the writing played a significant role. Eventually, the three narratives in Chapter 6.1 were formed, and the analysis could proceed to the third phase: analysing the narratives.

*The third phase of the analysis* focused on examining the three narratives to understand what they reveal. In this round of the analysis, I continued working with the three narratives. I coded these narratives and created comparable tables on them. Through this, the main findings began to become visible. I coded the narratives through the following codes: 1) Timespan, 2) Liminality, 3) Expression of “Who am I?”, 4) Expression of “Who am I not?”, 5) Systemacy and routines, and 6) Motivational factors. Through this coding analysis, the narratives began taking shape. Section 6.2 presents the results of this analysis, which brings us an understanding of building identity in under-institutionalized roles.

My approach to the analysis followed a process that is described as *the cyclical process of analysis*. In this cyclical process, all phases and tasks of the analysis are closely interlinked and do not occur in a linear continuum in which one task simply follows another. In fact, they occur in a terribly messy way – one after another; they also happen simultaneously and are repeated asymmetrically. This circular process is important since it enables the researcher to go deeper into the data and gain a better

understanding of it (Hennink et al., 2011). The essential tasks of analysis, which involved navigating the circular process, included close reading (see Paasio, 2022; Duck, 2018; Jin, 2017), theming, coding, writing thick descriptions, comparison, and theory development (e.g. Hennink et al., 2011). Writing thick descriptions of the data played a key role in my analysis. Thick descriptions are the foundations of the data analysis in qualitative research, and the aim of thick descriptions is to gain rich and detailed descriptions about the case under study (Hennink et al., 2011). In my situation, these cases were the stories that the participants shared during the interviews. Developing thick descriptions involves deep reading of the data and diving into each emerging theme through its context, meaning, and nuances. It helps in finding connections and relationships, as well as noticing patterns (Hennink et al., 2011). In my analysis, I moved back and forth between the analysis and the data, seeking evidence to support my findings in the data. I posed the data questions about my outcomes and attempted to ensure the accuracy of the data in relation to my findings.

As a result of this analysis, I conducted six stories of interim managers, presented in Chapter 5, and three narratives on constructing career and identity in the context of liminal work-life, presented in Chapter 6.1. Chapter 6.2 presents the analysis of the narratives. The narratives can be understood better through the stories of the interim managers, which is why we first look at the individual stories in the next chapter, after which we turn to look at the narratives and what these narratives tell us.

## 4.6 Trustworthiness of the study

Ensuring the quality of research is necessary for all research, including qualitative research, which employs a more subjective and interpretive approach. The researcher is obligated to ensure the audience that the research is methodologically and analytically rigorous, providing evidence that the research findings are sound, meaningful, and credible. To be found trustworthy, qualitative research must provide evidence that the data analysis is conducted in a precise, consistent, and exhaustive manner, which is shown through recording, systematizing, and disclosing the method of analysis in detail to convince the audience of the credibility of the process (Nowell et al., 2017). The classic criteria of good quality research – reliability, validity, and generalizability – are drawn from the quantitative research tradition (see, e.g. Patton, 2014; Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016). However, we encounter difficulties when using this classic evaluation criteria in qualitative research; therefore, novel ways for evaluating qualitative research have been generated (Patton, 2014). It is advised that in research relying on relativist ontology and

subjectivist epistemology, replacing the classic criteria with a criteria more suitable for this type of research might be better (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016).

A widely-used alternative criterion for constructionist qualitative research is Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four parallel dimensions model, which proposes trustworthiness as grounds for qualitative research and consists of four aspects: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. This four-aspect model, which reflects the trustworthiness of the research, functions as the criterion of "goodness" for the research (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016). This criterion is used in evaluating the rigor of this research. I also used Tracy's (2010) Eight "Big-Tent" model in assessing the trustworthiness of this research.

In search of a *worthy topic* for my PhD research, I extensively explored various new ways of working and entrepreneurial ways of working until I came to consider interim management, a familiar theme to myself. Even the matter of whether a topic is worthy is somewhat subjective. However, even via objective evaluation, interim management is a new way of working for individuals, as well as a new way of resourcing and obtaining the right type of expertise for organizations; it represents a form of work that falls between employed work and entrepreneurship – my core interest. As we strive to better understand the possibilities that these new ways of working provide, I can defend my topic with integrity, as I believe it is relevant in today's society and work-life.

The *credibility* of the research in Lincoln and Guba's (1985) model refers to the study's truthfulness. However, "truth" as a concept in constructionist research is problematic since the approach states that multiple realities and truths exist (Paasio, 2022). Therefore, how these multiple truths are represented becomes even more critical. In this sense, credibility is about the "fit" between the participants' views and how the researcher interprets these views (See Nowell et al., 2017). Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested multiple techniques for addressing the credibility of the research, such as prolonged engagement, persistent observation, data collection triangulation, and researcher triangulation. The key points to answer are the sufficiency of data, logical linking between observations and categories, and whether some other researcher might reach nearly the same conclusions as you (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016). As Tracy (2010) puts it, credible reports are such that the readers feel trustworthy to act upon them and make decisions based on them.

Chapter 4 has extensively discussed the methodological choices of this research. Detailed information about the selection of the participants and the criterion for their selection is provided. The data were collected as repeated interviews over a period of three to nine months, so the themes and issues discussed in the interviews did not occur only once; rather, the main themes were often repeated, lending weight to their value and importance. The sufficiency of the collected data is described in detail, and the quantity of the data is always a matter of judgment, as there is no clear

threshold in qualitative research when the quantity of data is sufficient. Chapter 4 provides a more detailed evaluation of this. Although only one researcher conducted this research, I have utilized the work of other researchers as commentators and obtained feedback from them to broaden my perspective and find evidence that the logic of this research is also comprehensible to outsiders. Moreover, I invited the participants to review and provide feedback on their stories and encouraged them to notify me if they identified any errors or misunderstandings. I employed multi-layered analysis to demonstrate the chain of thought from a single story to more general narratives, ultimately leading to a comprehensive interpretation of the themes. Direct quotations maintained the traceability to individual stories and brought the reader closer to the sense-making of the participants. This process aims to achieve credibility through what Tracy calls *thick descriptions*, involving in-depth descriptions of details and cultural meanings (See Tracy, 2010).

One method to show the credibility of the research is to make the research process visible. The previous paragraphs of this chapter 4 provide a detailed description of this process. I kept a log of all the phases of the research to be able to show how especially the analysis phase was conducted. I am a messy note-taker, but my notes on the analysis process clearly show the evolution and progress of my thought process. I also kept all the materials from the different analysis phases. Chapter 4.2 describes the process, which entails three different stages of analysis.

*Sincerity* of the research is characterized by the self-reflexivity of the researcher and the transparency of the methods and challenges (Tracy, 2010). Obviously, the researcher's previous experiences inevitably influence the research setting; therefore, I have done my best to open up my previous experiences on the studied subject and the issues that might affect the neutrality of the research, such as my values and possible biases towards the studied theme. In social constructionist research, the researcher is not an objective outsider seeking to uncover universal truths; instead, they are an active participant in the data collection and analysis. The researcher's experiences and interpretations about the world affect the research in several ways (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016). As an individual, I encounter the world from my unique perspective, which influences how I view it, the kinds of questions I pose about it, and the theories and hypotheses embedded in my perspective on it (Burr, 2015). The influence of the researcher to the study is discussed in a separate chapter 4.7.

*Transferability* of the research refers to the generalizability of the study and how the findings would hold true in other settings and contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2017). Transferability is not about replication but more about whether some type of similarity can be found in other research contexts (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016). It can also be described as theoretical generalizations that can be moved to another context (See Paasio, 2022; Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011). The

researcher is obligated to provide thick descriptions and a detailed understanding of the context so that an outsider can evaluate the transferability to another context (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2017). Detailed information about the context of the stories and the data collection is provided, as described in Chapters 4.2 and 4.3 and throughout the stories in Chapter 5. The detailed description of the data analysis provides important information that enables the outsider to evaluate the transferability of the research outcomes. The transferability of the research is also discussed in Chapter 7.3.

*Dependability* of the research refers to the researcher's responsibility for providing documentation and information to the audience about the process and convincing the audience that the research has been logical, traceable, and documented (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016). This includes that the research process can also be traced back (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To ensure visibility and assess the reliability of this research, detailed descriptions of the research process, data collection, and materials produced are provided. The methodological choices and the reasoning behind the narrative analysis approach are also described in detail to ensure that the work, logic, and reasoning behind the research can be followed and do not leave gaps between phases.

*Conformability* means that the data, interpretations, and outcomes must be linked so that even outsiders can follow these links, the process of thought can be traced, and the connections between data and interpretations are not merely imagined (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016). In constructionist research, the aim is not to show objectivity, as the researcher is not objective in the positivistic sense of the term. Rather, conformability refers to the traceability and neutrality of the research – a type of “audit trail” that links the data to the outcomes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). These links between the data and the outcomes are expressed in the thick descriptions of the different phases of the analysis. With these descriptions, I aim to provide the reader with an understanding of my thought process during the analysis.

## 4.7 The role of the researcher

Typical of social constructionism is that the researcher is not an objective outsider aiming to find universal truths, but an active participant in the data collection and analysis, drawing on their previous experiences and interpretations of the world (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016). Each of us encounters the world from a unique perspective, directing how we view the world and what sort of questions we pose about the world; our theories and hypotheses are also necessarily embedded in our perspective (Burr, 2015). As a researcher, I am present in the data collection as well as in the analysis of this data. Although active participation in data production would not be significant, my previous knowledge and experiences about the world, the

phenomenon at hand, and the interviews and interviewees shape my interpretation of the materials. Therefore, the researcher's active self-reflection is crucial in the research. The researcher is obliged to acknowledge their intrinsic involvement in the research and reflect carefully on what part this plays in the research (Burr, 2015). This reflexivity can be seen to include both the methodological reflexivity, which addresses the behavioural impact of the researcher on the research setting, and epistemological reflexivity, which concerns the researcher's belief systems (Johnson & Duberley, 2000).

The researcher is not an objective bystander but an active participant in the research. In this sense, there are also features about the insider researcher in this research. Insider research is a legitimate alternative in organizational research, especially when the attempt is to understand multiple voices and subjectivities (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007). The researcher's *pre-understanding* of the phenomenon being studied has been considered important to acknowledge in the research, as well as how this pre-understanding affects knowledge development in the study (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2022). Knowledge development is circular, meaning my initial pre-understanding of the phenomenon serves as the basis upon which new knowledge is built. In this sense, knowledge development is never complete but remains ongoing (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2022). As this pre-understanding is always historically and socially constructed, it has a propensity to foster prejudice (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2022). Therefore, it is essential to evaluate and acknowledge the role that my pre-understanding as the researcher plays in the study throughout the research.

Although all life events and experiences affect the research and my interpretation of the data, my background contains some factors that are particularly important, which may have more significance in this research than others. I initially became interested in interim management because, in my previous role, I was involved in establishing an interim management business within the organization where I worked. Through this, I gained insight into the logic of the business and how this type of business operates. I gained another important perspective on the phenomenon of interim management when I started working as a self-employed entrepreneur and made my own interim management assignments. Even the fact that I have been a self-employed entrepreneur plays a significant role when reflecting on the effects my experiences have had on the research. Furthermore, my experience as an interim manager – as an entrepreneur and as an employee – has provided a wealth of information and insight into the phenomenon. Obviously, I am also reflecting the stories the interviewees tell me about their entrepreneurship and interim assignments through my experiences. These experiences can be described as what Alvesson and Sandberg (2022) refer to as *pre-specific elements* of pre-understanding. Simultaneously, I find that these experiences combined have created my personal overview over of the studied phenomenon, a *pre-*

*pattern understanding* (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2022), of interim management and self-employment on a more general level.

My personal experiences as an entrepreneur have formed in me a very positive attitude towards entrepreneurship and self-employment. Similarly, my own interim management assignments have further strengthened my stance on the phenomenon. Most definitely, these pre-understandings and stances towards the studied phenomenon affect how I may apply a less critical perspective in my analysis. This may have somewhat prevented the more critical voices from being heard in the interviews and being raised in the analysis. My experiences as an entrepreneur and interim manager may have directed the analysis and the interpretation of the findings. Many themes emerged from the analysis, such as extreme customer value, isolation, excitement and adrenaline, insecurity and uncertainty, a desire to belong, and self-creation through portfolio-type work, strongly resonate with my personal experiences.

In social constructionist research, the researcher's personal and political values and perspectives play a significant role. Reflecting on the researcher's most inner and internalized values is almost impossible, but I am trying to gather some deeply personal values that may affect the research. The key associations I draw here pertain to a discrepancy I hold regarding the relationship between individualism and communality. This personal discrepancy is one reason I initially wanted to study this theme. I believe that individual goals, motivations, and life choices are crucial drivers and enablers in our world, both for individuals and society. Simultaneously, the importance of social communality, common goals of a community, and playing not for the benefit of yourself but for that of the greater good, also plays an important role at the individual level. Individualism and communality are not opposite and separate ideologies; they are only the different sides of the same coin – in the best case, complementing one another and driving in the same direction, for the common good and the good of the individual. These *pre-frame elements* (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2022) of my understanding have undoubtedly shaped this research; therefore, bringing them to visibility is important. My experiences are why I have started studying this phenomenon, and why the research design is built the way it is; they have also influenced the analysis of the research.

## 4.8 Research ethics

To ensure the ethical grounds of the research, I obtained the consent of all participants to participate in and be recorded during the interviews. I explained the study's purpose and aim, being mindful not to disclose too much information so as not to influence what they shared with me and what they chose to leave out. However, I noticed this happening during the interviews, as evidenced by comments

such as “Well, this money perspective does not really concern what you are studying, so I won’t go deeper into that.” After that, I encouraged them to discuss it further if they desired. I informed the participants that all interviews would be conducted anonymously, ensuring their identities would be unrecognizable from the study. To ensure anonymity, I sent the participants their stories to read and asked them to confirm there was nothing in the story they thought could reveal their identity. Most replied and checked their stories, but one I did not reach out to anymore, and another did not get back to me. The research data have been managed so that others, besides me, have not had any access to the original data or the interview transcriptions. The data was stored in my private cloud service files without anyone else having access to it. I was also cautious about not using the participants’ names in any files; I always used pseudonyms.

I discussed confidentiality with the participants and highlighted that they did not need to disclose any confidential information about their customers or assignments. However, as they were all management professionals, dealing with confidential matters and evaluating what could be said to outsiders and what not, was routine and very familiar to them. Everyone understood well that this type of confidential information would not be discussed.

For the transparency of the research, I will describe my use of AI in the process. I did not use any analysis software in the analysis, relying only on paper, different-coloured pens, tables, figures, and handwritten notes. No part of the data analysis entailed any use of software or AI. However, I used AI as a colleague with whom I asked for some advice. This was especially during the phase when I was trying to find the relevant theories to which I could attach my research. AI was a great conversation partner, providing me with many ideas upon which to base my search for relevant literature. For example, I might ask questions like, “Could you tell me more about liminality?”, “What are the main differences in employed work and entrepreneurship?”, or “What kinds of rites of passages are there?” I received good summaries from AI; it was an efficient way to get new ideas and develop them further. It was similar to brainstorming that could have been done with a real human colleague had one been available. I did not use AI to create any text for this dissertation, nor did I insert any confidential information or personal data into AI. Also, the entire analysis phase was conducted without AI, so no text from the transcriptions was inserted into any AI tool.

Due to the transparency of the research, it is essential to note that I continued to interview Isabella, William, and Clarissa annually after the interviews for this research had concluded for the purpose of future research. Those new interviews are not a part of this research, and I have been conscious about them, not allowing them to affect the analysis, even though at the time of the analysis, I knew what had happened to them and their careers afterwards.

## 5 Stories of the interim managers

### 5.1 William's story

William had a degree on Master of Economic Science and had graduated some ten-plus years ago. After graduating, he worked at a large business consulting company for a couple of years, then joined a relatively large Finnish company to focus on business development. In a few years, he received a director position at the same company and led one of its business functions. His position was a management team role; this position gradually grew heavier and evolved over time. He worked for this company for almost a decade.

William became familiar with interim management when he had ran his own business line at work and used interim managers to resource it. He had learned about the interim business market and how it worked. As he had followed the interim managers' work, he became interested in this way of working and discussed with them what life as an interim manager was like. He became interested in perhaps doing it himself but thought it might be something he would consider later in his career.

William grew into very intrapreneurial way of working at his previous job. He enjoyed the responsibility of being in charge of the entire business and felt that he owned what he was doing. He found that his way of working was as close to entrepreneurship as possible in a corporation. At some point, he realized he had been developing a business for someone else for many years and with the best business developers in Finland. So, he thought it would be crazy not to try it for himself.

*“Then it came that man, maybe life is short, and I want to try to see if I could make it on my own. Then it came that I did not have any ready business ideas or anything, but I had a lot of expertise that I thought I could maybe sell to another company. So, in a way... the idea came that maybe... It's a stepping stone to a more entrepreneurial way of doing [things] – to start a company and sell your own work hours. Through that, one can maybe test how well one manages an entrepreneur's risk, if it's at all my thing. I had no previous entrepreneurial experience, so I wanted to test it. I can get back into an employed job pretty fast if this doesn't feel like my thing; on the other hand, if I succeed in this, I can*

*start building some financial buffer to the company, so I can sometimes take the risk and start, you know... what one might call a proper business – a production company. So that's the logic, maybe. So, I think this is a good path towards the so-called entrepreneurial lifestyle or... path."*

He had been at the same company for almost ten years and began to think he had achieved his five-year project targets, realizing then he needed a new challenge as a person to be able to learn more. He almost accepted a position as an employed director in another company, but while amid the contract negotiations, he got a strong feeling of a lack of energy and ultimately turned it down.

*"And during 2021, I thought a lot about different options – employed work possibilities – and I went quite close to kind of like... actually, I was already at the contract table for a demanding position, which would have fulfilled all my expectations. But then, at the final meter, I didn't feel the same excitement and energy for the job; I noted there is something here now that I may not understand about myself: I don't want to go to such a really demanding ... building position – management team position; I don't have the energy for that. I thought that would be a kind of suicide."*

He felt that perhaps this was the time to try entrepreneurship to see how it felt, which had been his dream for some time. The momentum came when he knew the company was going through some organizational changes; thus, he felt it was a logical time to "make the move". He told his employer that if there was something new and interesting inside the company, he would discuss it; if not, he could start seeking a new direction for his career. They ultimately opted for the latter. After making this decision and being on sabbatical for the spring, William needed to find work. He thought he would do practically anything just to get the cash flow running – to be able to pay himself a salary, gain confidence, and gather references. One possibility arose, which was easy for him to take.

William ended up doing his first interim assignment in a manufacturing company with intensive growth. He had experience in this business area, and the company was interested in him and his expertise. The client company had no specific role or predefined need, but they wanted William's knowledge and expertise into their use. As William had prior experience in doing strategy work, they ended up having William do the professional strategy work. Originally, it was planned that the assignment would last about four months, with William working around four days per week. The assignment ultimately lasted 6 months.

He was thrilled about getting the assignment and found that there was an amazing possibility of making a big leap if the company succeeded in its strategy. The

assignment, in its entirety, was rather fragmented and prolonged a few times. For some time, he had been engaging in various activities in the organization, which were primarily driven by a resource deficiency rather than the strategy work that had originally been agreed upon. He could not think of the differences between the way of working compared to the interim work regarding whether he was doing this work as an employee of the company or as an entrepreneurial interim manager. The way of working was similar. Initially, the substance of the work motivated him, but eventually, as the assignment progressed, he lost his motivation for the assignment's main tasks. He found this was an important learning lesson for him: that the role in an interim assignment should be clearly defined. He also had difficulties getting the client organizations' attention enough to get things done.

William talked a lot in general about value he could bring to the client. He wanted his work to have meaning and to contribute to the company's success. He talked about sustainability, and it was important to him that the business he was involved with was sustainable and that the people were treated well. He always wanted to help develop leadership better. He was excited that his client could help other companies become more sustainable if they succeeded in their strategy; he found that helping them create their business on this was exceptionally motivating and meaningful.

Achieving the set goals, succeeding, and possibly even performing even a bit better than the client expected was important to William. He thoroughly enjoyed it when he could help others succeed. He reveled in helping a good person succeed. He did not need the praise and felt uncomfortable being in the spotlight. He helped others shine instead. William wanted to see his handprint on something bigger than himself and saw that this assignment made that possible. The company's purpose motivated him in this assignment, as well as the challenging, almost impossible time schedule, and the people. Money was another motivator, as this was also a financially important assignment. Of course, he wanted to succeed in this assignment because it might help him get an extension on the assignment. These factors kept him motivated towards the end of the assignment when the work tasks were no longer terribly motivating.

William found himself being over-competent in the assignment. Had this assignment been permanent employment, he most likely would have said, "This is not for me. I've grown out of this." However, in this new context, it felt different. Although the work substance was familiar, the company and business environment differed, making the work challenging. William believed it was crucial that he could now learn new things and broaden his perspectives. He wanted to explore new industries, businesses, clients, and colleagues, as well as widen his networks and perspective.

William felt a certain separateness from the company that felt good; he felt that he did not have to worry about the company's problems. He found it liberating not

to have all his eggs in one basket. He performed a few consultations work for other companies aside from this assignment and acknowledged that this assignment might end at any given day, after which he would need to find something else.

*“But... it’s not... I’m not like stuck in it mentally. I don’t worry about it subconsciously during weekends. Also, I don’t have to worry if there are some difficult people or something else – when I know this is not final. That at some point I [can] like... leave there. I just have to enjoy this so that I get to work here and help them forward. Hopefully, they also get a great success story for themselves, so I can say that I have been a part of their success. I’m not... stuck on those problems that stress me mentally.”*

William believed that when you were in an employed position, your whole life was there, and your whole livelihood depended on it. Thus, it certainly controlled your life more. He found that, unlike what people typically think, entrepreneurship could be even safer than employment because, if you lost one client, you still had others, while in employment, if you lost it, you lost everything. William enjoyed the fact that when he was not working, he was really not working. He could do anything he wanted; he just did not invoice the client for that time. He thought that maybe that was what people consider entrepreneurial freedom. He felt he had an overall responsibility for his life and his choices in general, and that making choices that supported his overall life was his responsibility. His previous life in employed work made him feel he was always on a hamster wheel. Doing things that seemed like they needed to be done and what was expected from him was easy. This exhausted him; in his free time, he just tried to recover from work and not even pursue anything special. Now, he greatly appreciated every billable hour he made and work in general more than ever. He lived more in the moment than he did before, worked fewer hours, and was certain he would not want to sell too much of his time. He wanted to ensure his well-being would not suffer.

He had noticed several changes in himself, particularly in relation to what he was like and the kind of life he had lived back in the days when he was still an employed director. He thought this had exhausted him at some point, rendering him unable to recover from work during weekends. His social energy had totally drained; he had lost the energy to call his friends to check in with them. Now that he worked a great deal from home, did independent work, and had fewer meetings, he had the energy to be interested in people in his life and plan his free time. He felt he had a whole life in which he could choose what he wanted to do. He understood that life was short. Entrepreneurship had made him his own master professionally. Everything was in his hands.

At times, William worried about finding new work when this assignment ended. When the assignment reached its halfway point, William felt that he needed to find a new assignment to alleviate his insecurity. He believed remaining in this assignment for too long was not good. One of his original goals in entering the interim business was to explore new business branches, and this business was somewhat similar to his experience in previous long-term employment. So, he needed to obtain projects from other business branches so he would not end up a “one-branch consultant”. Regardless of these occasional feelings of uncertainty about finding new work after this assignment, he still dreamed of creating such a balanced clientele with whom he would know he would have enough work. If he could create this balanced clientele, he would choose it over employment. He thought there might be a risk that employed work would end up exhausting him again – that he would lose the ability to live his life in the moment and enjoy it. He used to think he was “a career person” who worked a lot and that would bring him what makes life worth living. However, he figured that maybe it was not like that for him. Perhaps what made life worth living for him was that he could be happily present for his child and friends, learn new things, and have the energy to do so.

William’s thoughts about the future developed during the five months of interviews. Initially, he just wanted to further explore the entrepreneurial way of working and not make any more precise plans about the future. He thought entrepreneurship and employing others felt better at that point than returning to an employed director’s work. As time passed, his thoughts about not returning to employed work and continuing the entrepreneur path strengthened. He was not ready to re-enter employment; he found that his path as an entrepreneur was still unfinished. He thought that maybe, at some point, if something interesting appeared, he could return to employment. He figured that if he did not succeed on the entrepreneurial road, he might be forced to consider reorienting to waged work. He wondered how he could manage it while maintaining his well-being. He had not entirely closed the door to employed work. He got self-confidence from the assignment and even though work did not grow on trees, he was positive about the future and attaining new work as an entrepreneur. His thoughts about not wanting to make any fixed decisions about what his future could hold held, even towards the end.

William’s thoughts on interim management remained similar throughout the assignment. He did not see himself in interim management for good, but he might be in this role now for a while and maybe it would open to him what it was that he might want to do next. For William, interim management was somewhat problematic since it paid hourly and was not scalable. He thought it might be a lonely way to work, as he enjoyed communality and working within a team. As the assignment drew to a close, William had discovered a network of entrepreneurs with whom he

was highly enthusiastic and pondered whether this network could provide the community he had been missing.

For William, the next big milestone was landing a new assignment. He thought it would help him overcome the insecurity he experienced regarding entrepreneurship as a career choice, and he needed that next assignment to gain self-confidence. He had not really engaged in any sales activities because there had been no urgent need to find new work. He struggled between the need to do sales so that he would have some work when this assignment ended and his concentration on this ongoing assignment. He was not overly worried about finding work, though; he believed something would come along. He had a financial buffer in the bank in case nothing came soon. Eventually, he hoped to find work where he could invest capital to generate income. However, he thought one could never know where to find oneself and what kinds of possibilities would arise. He would look ahead six months to a year to see what would come.

## 5.2 Elena's story

Elena had a long and impressive career; for the last decade, she had been doing interim assignments through her own company. All her work as an entrepreneur had been within IT projects for different clients and in various roles within those projects. She could, with good reason, be called an interim professional.

Elena had spent her entire career within the IT sector. She had worked at software provider companies in project leadership and professional services. Just a few years after graduation, when she was working in a large Finnish IT company, a part of that company was divided, and it was purchased by the employees of the company. That is how Elena became one of the main partners and owners of this company, where she also worked. Elena stayed there for ten years. Eventually, she ended up working in a large U.S.-owned IT corporation with a side office in Finland. Her positions and roles changed rapidly; and at the time when her children were born, she was a business development director for Northern Europe.

From that position as Business Development Director, she took parental leave, during which she established her own company and worked on project management "gigs". She found working through her own company being rather nice; nevertheless, she returned to her employed job after her parental leave ended. However, the seed of working for herself had been planted. Her idea was that eventually, she would start working entirely for her own company. She continued working in various roles and positions for a couple of years and then spent approximately three years as a consultant director at another company. Eventually, she resigned and founded her own company, where she has since been working for herself doing IT project management as interim manager.

Elena considered that her entrepreneurial journey had already begun when she became a partner-owner of the business, which had been separated from the large company. She considered it the start of her entrepreneurial journey, but while working gigs as an entrepreneur on parental leave, she noticed that she could earn a nice amount of money like that and most importantly, she had the freedom to decide how much she worked. The trigger for her to eventually fulfill her plans to become a full-time entrepreneur came when she worked as the consultation director in a large company, where her supervisor would not allow her to take time off work after working long hours for an extended period. Elena came to realize there was no point in working like crazy, earning a monthly paycheck, and being unable to take any free time. She resigned and started her journey as an entrepreneur. Elena mentioned that, of course, entrepreneurship had risks, but one just had to take the risk to see if one could manage. Initially, she had the option to return to employed work; she had been offered employed work during these years but she had always declined. Elena started doing interim management because this type of project-like work came natural to her, and she excelled at it. She also had experience from this type of work, so it seemed like a natural path for her.

Elena's current interim assignment was as a project director assignment within a major IT system update. The project was quite significant and important for the client. When asked to do this assignment, she had two other possible assignments in discussion. However, after meeting the client, she became excited and accepted the assignment. Everything in this assignment seemingly matched. The assignment was planned to last approximately ten months and was full-time work.

Everything in the assignment went splendidly, and the atmosphere was positive. Challenges and tough situations cropped up in her interim projects, but that was part of the work – business as usual. Moreover, time schedules become intense at some point, and the workload became substantial. However, this assignment had been quite pleasant, and she had enjoyed it. She said she had also had different kinds. She shared an example of a project in crisis, which she had joined when the project had been ongoing for six years; the original plan was for it to be completed in three years. This was the worst project she had ever had. These kinds of assignments were rare, but that experience had taught her to be extremely careful regarding the kinds of projects she accepted.

Elena had a strong will to help the client. Even in the more difficult projects where the atmosphere might not have been so pleasant, she believed it was her responsibility to take the project through to completion and take responsibility. She thought if you started it, you had to finish it. She believed you would not do this work if you did not push forward, regardless of the circumstances. Assignments would end quite fast then. Fun or not, it was the requirement for this occupation, she said, that you took the work ahead all the time and carried the responsibility.

Elena had two assignments going on side by side, and workdays tended to get long. She said she was terrified of Christmastime and the turn of the year because both assignments had their critical moments then. She wondered how she could clone herself. The side assignment should have ended at the turn of the year, but the schedule had been prolonged. However, her work quality remained unaffected. She said her situation was good in that both her clients knew she had these two projects occurring simultaneously, and she could discuss the situation openly with them. She continued that having two assignments had only to do with her own calendar management, as she found time for both of them and always looked at things well ahead of time. Eventually, her workdays became extremely hectic and long, which negatively impacted her well-being, causing her to feel stressed and tired. However, she managed to do both assignments well. She was planning to take a week's holiday in February to go to a cabin in Lapland and insisted she would not be working then. However, this was not typical in her work. She said she did not remember when she had been on vacation for a week without working at all. She was able to have this holiday eventually and not work during it.

The second assignment, which had been prolonged due to reasons beyond her control, frustrated her. Her sense of responsibility and strong will to avoid leaving the client in trouble outweighed her frustration. It was important to her that she did not do things halfway; she wanted to do things well and properly.

*“...you always have to think about the whole picture and the client's side – that if you just [acted] out of your own feeling of comfort or your own mind, so you wouldn't have many clients anymore – that you always have to think through that in good cooperation, will carry on.”*

The work itself motivated Elena – the work tasks and the substance of the project. It needed to be interesting for her. Solving challenging situations, completing projects successfully, and ensuring that the system functions as it should, excited her. She found it exciting to meet new people, face new situations, and not one day was ever the same. She chose her assignments carefully. She preferred getting into the project when it was just starting. The length of the assignment was also important to her. Elena had learned to consider the client and their background when deciding whether to take on a project. She said she was extraordinarily careful regarding what she takes. A good team made the work even more motivating. There were differences in how clients perceived her position in the company; sometimes she felt like one of the employees and was treated accordingly; however, in other companies, an invisible curtain appeared – a boundary that kept her more outside. However, it depended on the company and the culture. She might have considered this as a

statement of mistrust, but she found that this mindset said more about the company culture than it did about her.

Elena had enjoyed her entrepreneurship, and everything she said that this was her way of doing what she enjoyed. She loved her assignments and wanted to continue doing them. She thought that being an interim manager was one form of entrepreneurship.

*“That I do what I want. These projects are what I want to do, and I have not had that in my working life that I would have thought of the titles, money, and status, but I like the work tasks... Like, I have always thought about what I want to do. That’s what has been the next interesting task, so this is the same here – that I do what I want, and these projects are the thing that I enjoy.”*

She wanted to ensure it was understood that she did this out of her own will. She stated that she had resigned herself and had been offered employment, but she had not wanted to accept it. She said she enjoyed the freedom and that you could define yourself what you do. However, there was the other side as well. She thought the risks were enormous. The first was the risk of getting sick: *Then you have nothing.* The second was whether new projects would not come, but she stated that she had never found this problematic; on the contrary, she had enjoyed the challenge of finding her own assignments and being her own boss.

Elena and her husband were both project people with extensive experience from different businesses. For some time, they had considered expanding Elena’s business by trying to duplicate what Elena was doing. They were well along in building a platform for this and had financing lined up, but it had to be paused due to unexpected personal reasons. However, they had planned to resume this work. She had planned to put more effort into this development if her second side assignment ended; then, she would have time for this expansion. However, this kind of time never came during these assignments; she had been so absorbed in the assignments that there simply had not been time.

She thought that once they got the business running, she would continue doing the work to some extent, but as she had just turned 60, perhaps she could reduce her workload a bit and not work so hard anymore. However, she did not want to quit entirely, as she liked it too much. She said she could not see herself retiring yet – just maybe taking more holidays over the summer and such.

When considering an employment position, Elena’s stance was consistent: That was not an option for her.

*“No, I am so committed to this, and at this age, there are not many years left either, so I want to use those years right here – doing what I am doing now. In*

*fact, when I left, I told that when I was the consultation director in that one company and... the race was just crazy and hilarious, and I worked like crazy, so at that point, I got the feeling that (I turned 50 then), so I started to think about what I wanted – to be doing when I grew up [laughs]. Then I resigned. And the same continues. That I have not regretted for a moment. It was one of the best decisions in my career, if not the best. Everything has led to this. You can't do this as a junior. Or you could, but from a bit of a different set-up."*

As the assignment started to reach its end, Elena began to explore the types of assignments available so that when this one ended, she would not end up with nothing. For her, this was the downside of the occupation. However, she added that she had never encountered a situation where she would not have work. The end of the assignment was unclear, as it might have been prolonged; therefore, she could not plan or make any decisions about the future before just a few weeks before the assignment would end.

Elena's project eventually ended according to plan; even the side assignment was completed. However, she had agreed to do one day per week in the client company over the summer. She did not get any break between the assignments, but had taken a long, 2,5-year full-time assignment that had been offered and decided to accept it, effective immediately. She had been asked also to another assignment at that point, so she would have had options. However, she decided to go for this one because it was something so new to her, and the client was significant; the assignment was also long, so she did not need to think twice about it. She wanted a longer assignment for a change. She thought short assignments were so intensive that they were rather consuming, leaving no energy to do anything else, like developing her own business. She thought it was nice not having to constantly think about what was coming next.

Elena had a full-time new assignment and one day a week for the old assignment, so, altogether, six days of work per week, with summer coming up. She said they were leaving abroad on holiday after Midsummer for a week. She figured that it could be quiet during July in the new assignment, so there would be some leeway there. She found that things would not be so hectic, and she could have shorter days. She had been working full-time, over 40-hour workweeks, for the entire year. I asked how she coped. She said she managed and could take a shorter day occasionally or "to take a weekend".

Elena had not given much thought to her life after this upcoming assignment. She said she lived in this moment now and considered that in a couple of years, she would be at retirement age, and then she might work less and maybe retire part-time, depending on how they managed to develop their business.

### 5.3 Werner's story

Werner was in his 50s and could be called an interim professional. He had graduated in the early 21st century with a Master of Economic Sciences. He began working in the banking and finance industry even before graduating and then moved abroad for work. For the next few years, he worked for various companies in different positions, eventually joining a large corporation, where he spent eight years in various roles and positions. After eight years, he thought it was time to do something else.

At that point, he had the opportunity to take on an interim assignment abroad and subsequently resigned from his job. However, he did not resign with no work waiting for him; his decision to leave was made earlier. He eventually resigned when this new possibility presented itself. Ever since that first assignment, for over the last decade, he has taken on interim assignments, mainly in Finland but also abroad. He has also undertaken some advisory and consulting work for various clients, in addition to the assignments, and between them.

Werner does not really consider himself an entrepreneur. In his latest employed job, where he had worked for eight years, he began to wonder what he would like to do next. At that time in Finland, the mentality existed that if you worked for this specific large company, everything else was lesser. Werner described the mentality of other companies' executives towards him: "Why would you want to come work for us because this company is so great and gorgeous, and we are this small?" For Werner, it was this mentality that led him to consider entrepreneurship and interim management as a means of working for these other companies without them employing him. As he described, they thought, *You don't want to work here because you have worked there (at the former employer)*. Although he tried to explain that, despite the numbers being big in that particular company, the problems and struggles were similar everywhere. The prejudice of the companies became an obstacle to his career development, prompting him to provide interim work for them as an entrepreneur.

This client company, which was now ongoing, was undergoing a significant reorganization, including major arrangements to be made within the company so that an M&A could be completed successfully. The assignment was close to full-time. Simultaneously, the company was recruiting a new permanent CFO. The assignment had originally been agreed to last for six months, but Werner said at the start of the assignment, "We'll see how that goes then." The length depended on the new CFO's recruitment process. The assignment ultimately lasted around four months. This assignment was particularly interesting for Werner, especially because of the assignment's new substance, which he had not been involved with before. Werner's motivation stemmed from the work on the assignments. He had never been involved in a case where a competition official would have demanded such an arrangement in a company. He was also interested in how the new organization would be founded

in this connection, what its basic functions and processes would entail, and how everything would have to be built from scratch. A new owner would come in and take charge, and it was interesting to see how that went.

Werner wanted to take on interim assignments because they involved very project-type work, and typically, an interim manager was brought in if a company had a problem. When the interim manager was appointed, things needed to start happening quickly. Interim work was not long-term development of which results could typically be seen maybe after three years. According to Werner, if you wanted to see and be involved in the company's long-term development, interim work was not the place to do that. Interim work was quite hands-on and short-term, but it also required consideration of the long-term effects on the company. You also needed to consider the client's best interest regarding long-term effects, even though you would not be there to see these effects or be the person responsible for them. He found it interesting that all the assignments were different, everything within the companies was different, and all business drivers and value creation approaches were distinct. In interim management, you could see how different companies work. You met many people, and each one was different.

For Werner, it was taken for granted that what was promised was done. His goal was always to do a bit more to keep the client happy. He said it usually ended up with the client wanting to employ him.

*“And then it usually goes so that the client asks if I want to come work for them, and then I say I don't want to. And then they are like, ‘Why?’ Then we have that discussion [laughter]. But I have not yet gone to work anywhere for a client.”*

Werner did not have any specific career goals; he simply wanted to continue in this manner, taking on various assignments as they arose. He did not want to go to employed work “to be like a CFO of a stock market listed company or something”. The intrigue of work depended more on the individual assignments. He also had some financial goals regarding his company. He was now a solid interim manager with no intention of returning to waged work. However, he had struggled with people understanding his perspective in the past; even now, people struggled to accept that he really did not want to be employed anywhere.

*“Then, of course, I have been doing this since 2013, so when I started, the challenge was that people were not aware of you doing these kinds of assignments. And maybe back then, the attitude was like that: ‘Aha, you're doing this because you have not found any real job’. In one assignment, the chairman of the board just said, ‘Yeah, that's why you are doing this – because you haven't found real work.’ I said, ‘No, no, this is like the business model; this is the idea...’*

*this is what I do,' to which he replied, 'Aha, okay.' But I could see the guy was thinking he was right – that I just hadn't found any real work [laughter]. But the attitude is, well, maybe changing a bit also, as has been said, the market is growing somewhat."*

This current assignment was the second one Werner did through an intermediate company; he had obtained all his other client assignments through his own contacts. As he had freely been able to agree about everything before, he had worked so that if the client said he did not have to come tomorrow, that was it. It was natural that you could not say beforehand how long these assignments would continue. This was a kind of extreme flexibility, which Werner valued. Almost all his assignments had eventually been longer than what was initially predicted. He could make simple agreements with clients because they could mutually say this was not what they expected, and the assignment could end. It was not only the client's decision but also his if the assignment turned out to be something he did not want to be involved with.

Werner's personal brand was crucial to him, and he was extra careful in protecting it. He carefully selected his assignments because he wanted to avoid becoming known as a single-thing specialist. He wanted his work portfolio to be wide and support his personal brand. Werner had once ended an assignment because he did not trust the company's CEO and the company's actions. He said that Finland is such a small market that he had his own brand to consider; thus, he could not be involved in something he could not rely on. The decision to leave a client was extreme and was only taken when absolutely necessary. He carefully protected his personal brand, avoiding risks that could harm his reputation. His method of securing new work was based on one assignment leading to another, and so on. A good reference and a good name were important. All his work and the company's vitality were based on that. The capital investors were his main clientele, and this was long-term work with them. If an interim professional started an assignment and only did short-term work, they would not be doing it for long. Although there were many different companies, and the assignments only lasted 6–12 months, there were only a few of these capital investors who were actually his principals operating in the background.

He had also declined assignments. He had done a couple of stock market listings in a row, and although many more were coming, he had rejected many of them because he did not want to take on so many similar assignments consecutively. He did not want to become "the stock guy" but wanted to profile more as a general financial expert. Because interim management ensured that clients chose an interim manager who had done the type of work they needed at that point, the interim manager did not come there to practice; they had done it before and knew what they were doing. This was why Werner thought there was a risk that it would direct you

to end up doing similar assignments successively. It was his own responsibility to try to choose such assignments that widened his personal work portfolio.

Werner optimized the client value in everything he did, and he carefully evaluated how different things affected the value he provided to the client. One thing was that it would not be good for his personal brand if he stayed in an assignment longer than necessary and charged the company for something that did not provide value anymore. It would diminish the company's feelings about the value of the assignment as a whole if he stayed there, even if he had initially provided significant value. He believed it was always the end that people remembered, which was why he wanted the ending of the assignment to bring as much value to the company as possible.

An interim manager's work suited Werner well. When he had an assignment, he was fully committed; usually, many things needed to happen. The diversity of all the assignments made it interesting. The assignment was typically a hard press that required a great deal of work, especially in the beginning. He worked for a daily price and did not count hours. He could accept a new assignment straight after one had ended but thought having some time off at some time during the year was a good thing. He did not consider the intensity of the assignments to be exhausting but gained energy from this type of work. He also gained energy from new assignments, as everything was new to him.

For Werner, entrepreneurship was about being able to freely agree on the terms of the assignment with the client, making a deal that worked best for both of them. As an entrepreneur who typically worked on a daily price tag, he had to convince the client that each day provided value. Entrepreneurship in his situation meant he could pick and choose which cases he took on and enter into any kind of agreement with the client. However, Werner did not particularly consider himself an entrepreneur. He was not developing his company, but his own experience and personal brand.

*"I don't know. I don't think of myself much like an entrepreneur; it is more that these things that matter to me. I am not building any structural capital for my company, but my company is just like... a tool for what I do. If I wanted to sell my company, no one would buy it because the only source of income is me. And if I did not stay there, then in a way, I'm not, in that way, an entrepreneur. I don't build such structural capital in the company."*

There was no doubt in Werner's answers about possibly returning to an employed job. His answer was strict no. This was his way of working. He just had to find another assignment after this one. He had been asked if he would work for the client in every assignment except one. The same had happened with this assignment. Every time he had said no. He told that nowadays almost in every

interview he already tells that it was not a possibility that he would come work there. Still, they always ask, as if they cannot believe he would not want to continue working for that company permanently.

Werner said many people did not want to do interim assignments because of the pause between assignments. Because the assignment could end any time, you did not know when the next would start. He said he could not plan a new assignment until maybe one week before the assignment ended and could say he was free. There could be a three-month period without any assignments; that was the other part of entrepreneurship. This had been more of a problem at the beginning of his career as an interim manager than now. He no longer worried about this. He knew assignments would come at some point.

As the assignment drew near its end, an intermediate company had been in contact with Werner and suggested an assignment abroad. Werner was not sure about that yet. He had not done any activities to find a new assignment. He believed the best way to advance his business was by completing his assignments well and establishing a word-of-mouth reputation. Of course, he met people, took them to lunch, and so on – not to sell but to remind them of himself in case they had needs. A couple of consultation projects with his business partner kept him busy for a while. He was confident that a new case would come. Earlier in his interim career, he thought more about when the next assignment would come, but not anymore. Although he trusted that a new assignment would come, he could not know if it would be in one month or three. He said the assignments typically came quickly, and then you needed to start immediately.

*“...In a way, there is no visibility to the next assignment in this job.”*

## 5.4 Isabella's story

Isabella had a long experience in finance and HR. She had worked in many organizations in various, mainly finance-related positions. She had graduated in the early years of the 21st century with a Master of Economic Sciences, after which she held various roles at different companies. Isabella greatly appreciated all the experience she had gained and reflected on how different experiences had always resulted in something else.

A few years after graduation, she worked for a large Finnish company, where she secured a role as a controller for a relatively narrow but multi-country business area. Despite the narrowness, work was plentiful. This work was fast seen, and Isabella wanted to see something new; she switched to another company, where she worked for a few years, after which she moved to another company, where she worked for the next decade. The entire company underwent a transformation during

the time that she worked there. She was responsible for the finance and HR functions. Over the years, many developments have occurred, including spin-offs, transformations, and numerous business cases. It was hectic and marked by continuous change but eventually the work however repeated itself as she was there for ten years. She was then headhunted for her last employed position before starting her entrepreneurship. In this job, she was responsible for the company's entire finance function; the role grew progressively heavier, and the workload got extensive. The job was rather exhausting.

Isabella had worked with a consultant in her latest employed position; this consultant was an entrepreneur who did projects for clients. She had witnessed the consultant's work from a close distance and thought already back then that it might be a nice way to work. They had discussed about this type of work arrangement, and Isabella had told the consultant that, at some point, this type of work could interest her. She had thought about entrepreneurship a few times before but had always thought it was too difficult to jump into, making it an unrealistic idea.

After leaving her latest employed position, Isabella had taken some time off. This previously mentioned consultant then approached her, as the consultant had an assignment which she could not take herself; however, she found that Isabella might be suitable for the assignment. The consultant suggested Isabella that she could make an offer to the client. Isabella had received a severance deal from her employer, so she was freed from financial pressure for a while, enabling her to try this possibility on a low threshold. Her situation and the consultant's contact opened up an avenue to entrepreneurship for her, as she called it. This possibility, in a way, landed in her lap without any marketing or effort. All the pieces seemed to be in place, so it became clear that she would start a company.

The business branch of the client company was familiar to her. The client company needed a financial professional to advise them on the financial function during a transition period. This was not initially an interim assignment but an advisory role to provide advice for the CEO. Eventually, she transitioned into an interim management role in which she was responsible for the company's finance function. Originally, it was agreed that Isabella would work approximately ten hours per week, and she was content with this arrangement, as she did not want to take on too much work at that time. She preferred starting lightly, which the client agreed to. However, it rapidly turned out that Isabella did more work than what was originally agreed upon and she took on more responsibilities, which was fine for both parties. Isabella worked at this organization for about a year and in the interim role for 6–7 months.

The workload in the assignment had been good, and Isabella had completed proper workdays, which mainly consisted of the daily tasks related to running the finance function. However, she said with amazement that she had had two weeks of

vacation during the first months of the year. For her, the possibility of a real holiday was exceptional and had been impossible when she had been in employed positions.

Isabella had done an exhausting amount of work in her previous jobs, especially in her last employment before starting her entrepreneurial journey. The responsibility did not weigh so heavily on her in this interim assignment as it had in employed positions. She had enough work to provide for herself, yet the workload was not overwhelming. Moreover, she enjoyed that this was not permanent. Although the content of the work did not motivate her as much, she felt that it was nice to know that this project would eventually come to an end. Although the content of the work was un motivating, she was quite thankful and pleased that the assignment had lasted this long. Often, Isabella returned to talk about the fragmented and over excessive workload which she found to be characteristic and obligatory in finance-related positions in organizations. Isabella highlighted that one positive aspect of interim management was that one could focus on essential work tasks. However, she missed the more strategic work and management teamwork that she was not involved in for this assignment. She considered that if she would have been a permanent employee in this position, she most likely would have been included in the management teamwork and strategic planning.

The hourly-based invoicing, combined with the fact that she and the CEO had not agreed very clearly on the practicalities of the work, created some confusion about invoicing. Because it was important for Isabella not to waste the client company's money and to focus her work on things that provided value, this led to some unclear situations. This even resulted in doing some work for free. Sometimes, she did not invoice for attending some joint meetings unless they specifically dealt with profitability or something that directly related to her area. The practicalities were not clear on all aspects, so she tried to find a good compromise this way.

Isabella had a strong principle in her work that she did it well. It was a matter of professional pride or character that she had built within her. She did not want to do things poorly, even though she knew she would not be there long. She also thought that maybe this had something to do with her reputation; she needed good recommendations from the CEO to land new assignments. She found herself being over-competent to the work, but because of this, she had provided the client with even more than they had expected, because she had much experience from this work. She was able to help the organization, and the people in the organization were very happy that they could rely on her help – that she got things done and provided value for the company.

Isabella believed that the work in the finance function, especially when it included HR, was impossible to manage within normal working hours. Rarely were the resources sufficient for succeeding in the work within normal working hours. Thus, she had been considering that somehow the time used should be taken into her

own hands, were she to remain in finance management. Otherwise, she should consider changing her area of work entirely.

*“...It’s not like so all-encompassing somehow; there’s some element that’s missing. It’s really an interesting question. Your research question is really, you know... good because it has something to do with commitment to that, so it doesn’t become such big stress and pressure about the responsibility that is there. When you know it’s temporary, it’s not like... I would be here for several years and maybe getting promotions...”*

In employed work there was also repetition which was not motivating for her. For example, she had typically budgeted 3–4 times a year, which became routine; it was easy to lose the motivation to do it. However, in interim management, one knew you did not have to do it many times – that it was only temporary. She experienced a sense of lightness in the work as interim manager.

Insecurity was seemingly an essential part of an interim manager’s work. The ending of the interim assignment was not clear until the very end. The ending could not be well anticipated, which affected the interim manager’s ability to agree on new assignments until the assignment was nearing its end. Isabella had received many contacts from intermediate companies asking if she was available for new assignments; however, at that point, acting on them was quite difficult because she knew the amount of work in this assignment would calm down – just not yet. However, she did not find this temporality and vagueness of the assignment’s due date to be a bad thing. She thought it was worth it. At this point in her life, she needed more time for her family, which this way of working enabled. Of course, financial insecurity sometimes made her wonder, but she had managed to achieve some financial security. Her life did not fall apart from being without work for one or two months, in case a new assignment could not be found immediately. She was quite relieved that so many contacts and assignments were available. Thus, she was rather unconcerned about finding something new after this ended. However, she struggled with the conflict between making sure that she got some work after this and then with the idea of having a good summer holiday.

It was important to Isabella that she could work according to her own values. The advantage of interim management was that the assignments were temporary. If the client turned out to be completely opposed to her values, she could withdraw from the assignment. She reckoned that maybe working in this kind of company would be more tolerable when you knew it was only temporary; maybe she would have the courage to give more direct feedback, as she would not depend on this client so much.

Isabella's well-being was much better now than it had been in her previous work. She believed this was because in this assignment, she could focus on the main work. She had been able to manage her own working hours and take days off. There was no emotional pressure if she was out of work; she knew it was okay because she simply did not invoice the client. In that way, she said she was not cheating anyone if she was not working. According to Isabella, the culture in the client organization was so good that there would most likely be good circumstances for this kind of freedom had she been employed there. There was no culture of working excessively and prolonged workdays. The interim work, being such a flexible way of working, pleasantly surprised her and was much less stressful than her previous work. Before this assignment, she was a bit insecure about whether she could jump into new assignments because, typically, in employment, jumping in took time. However, contrary to her expectations, interim work had been more relaxed, and she did not need to feel such pressure about it.

Isabella said entrepreneurship had felt good, and imagining jumping back into employment would be difficult. However, she understood that at some point, a situation might require her to return to employment, or some great job might present itself, prompting her to leave this arrangement. She had not ruled out the possibility of employment, keeping her eyes open for that opportunity and having discussions about it. She did not have any need to change this arrangement; on the contrary, she might even start growing her business rather than working for someone or returning to the corporate world. She had many business ideas and saw the interim manager market as hot and growing in Finland in the coming years. She had considered whether there might be some business opportunities there to start growing her company or launching another on the side. However, her insecurity increased as she continued talking about these possibilities. She believed she could expand the business at some point but admits that now was not the time for that. Her life situation, capacity, and ability to take risks were currently insufficient. However, she was certain that the time would come when the time was right.

*“... But you know, I have so many ideas about my own business that I could do. That now, this is like, I'm more like collecting cash and getting ready for the moments that can come. For example, there is nothing (work), and during those times, I would like to start doing some of these – my ideas.”*

Isabella had not really undertaken any activities related to her own business during her assignment. She had not even done the webpages she was supposed to do. Regarding her work portfolio and to control the insecurity associated with taking only interim assignments, Isabella would have enjoyed having some baseline work

that would recur monthly – something that would ensure a steady monthly income, even when there were breaks between projects or assignments.

*“I have a lot on my mind. It would be fun to start advancing based on my own idea and do something like starting a business. But it is also such a dream that is a bit different from what this is. But maybe this way of working enables them to be advanced at some point as well. There might be time and resources for it as well.”*

Isabella did not think about career so much. Doing something she enjoyed, where she could define for herself what she did and when she did it, was more important to her. In her last employment, she suffered due to a severe conflict of values, but had to remain there because she had no other options. She had to stay and be a part of it all, and it did not feel good. For her, freedom meant being able to decide for herself which assignments she took. If something did not feel right about the assignment, she could refuse it. She highlighted that working according to her values was important to her.

*“The older one gets, the more value one places, and it goes beyond everything else that... the career thinking and what’s next looks good in a CV. And the less one thinks about those things and believes that when you do things that feel good and right, in a way, you can count on it taking you forward, and that’s enough. So... that it puts you in the right direction, and not so that I end up doing the wrong things in the wrong place. If I just go according to how I’m supposed to go because it is a part of this form – to take this road... Maybe you get a job that sounds great, but it looks like it doesn’t mean anything at all, so you would rather go to work where you can be satisfied.”*

Isabella had numerous contacts regarding new assignments throughout the entire assignment. Most potential assignments came through intermediate companies, and one of these proceeded, which required her to start there immediately. Isabella accepted the new assignment and jumped into it. This assignment was a CFO role in a company that had recently undergone an acquisition. She found the role and the company’s situation incredibly interesting and challenging. The role included more leadership work – something Isabella had been missing. The full-time assignment would last around 3–4 months. The situation in the company was not easy, and they had been very honest with her about it. It sounded like something she would not have touched – “even with a long stick” – had this been something more permanent or long-term. Despite the challenging situation, she wanted to take it on because she thought she could learn a great deal from it. She believed that even if it turned out

not to be so nice, she would still learn something from the negative experiences. Besides, hardly anything too bad could happen because the time frame was so short. You never knew what doors it might open in any given situation.

So Isabella ultimately started a new assignment straight after the previous one ended. She pondered that she could most likely take some vacation in the summer and take some days off.

*“So it was really amazing because I had been preparing for maybe not having anything in the summer. I would have just kept a longer summer vacation, and that would not have been a bad idea. I was also semi-satisfied with that idea, but there’s the fact that no one pays you anything. I could have done it, but then again, there is the risk in the back of my head that I will [not] get any new case for the fall. So now it kind of went away because I can be here. Well, at least for a couple of weeks, I think I can have a (vacation) in July. --- Well, in June, I, in fact, had already booked a week with the kids. I couldn’t even cancel it, and it was like, ‘It is what it is.’ I do have that summer vacation, even though this came in time for summer.”*

Isabella felt like she could do interim management for a long time. However, if an interesting employed job with good compensation presented itself, she might consider it. Although one could earn better hourly rates in interim work, it was always an insecure income. There were always risks, and employment was a more secure solution. She had not actively considered her long-term plans. Everything had gone so well, and she had received numerous contacts regarding assignments, so she now believed she would get work. She still wanted to continue on this entrepreneur’s path. Although she did not seek anything permanent, she did not say absolutely no to it either.

## 5.5 Seymour’s story

Seymour was an experienced finance professional in his late 50s. He had graduated with a Master of Economic Sciences but had also undertaken extensive additional education throughout his life. His work history was impressive and diverse. He had done much, in many companies and held different roles. It would be fair to call him a financial multi-fighter. He had worked for example as a controller, finance manager, CFO, and CEO. He had done auditing, consulting, and interim management. He had been an employee, a director, a consultant, and an entrepreneur. He had done traditional financial work (e.g. M&As, auditing, and IPOs).

Seymour briefly mentioned the years, companies, and positions, but his concentration was on what he had done for the organizations. He described in great

detail what he had been doing, what had happened, and where the organization ended up. His focus was on the substance of what he was doing. Work came to him mainly through his networks and headhunters. When someone asked him to fill a role that seemed interesting, he took it. There was a low significance over what the position or the status was or whether the work should have been done as an employee or as an entrepreneur.

At some point in his career, he had also established his own company. This was in a situation where it seemed that the company that he worked for would no longer need his expertise. He did consultation as entrepreneur around for half a year, after which he came across a company that he found interesting and went to work there.

*“But then I thought I should somehow use my expertise in some way, and then I left there. I started my own company in which I did auditing.”*

Once he had offered his expertise to a client as interim management, but the client wanted to have him work for them as employee. So he went to work there, despite thinking the work would be better suited as an interim assignment. He spent two years in that role. That was his latest employed job before he started this assignment. This assignment came to him when a representative from an intermediate company contacted him and informed him about it. He then decided to leave his employed work and undertake this assignment through his own company. He had already had his own company for many years, enabling him to do things quite fluently in myriad ways because he had the infrastructure ready to jump into things, regardless of the form of work.

Seymour found that entrepreneurship was a more flexible and effective way to use his expertise than working solely for one company. Using his experience was more varied, and it was more interesting than being in only one company. As an entrepreneur, one had the possibility to do more varied work and side assignments because interim positions were typically not full-time.

This assignment came to Seymour when he had already decided to leave his previous work because he lacked passion for the business, and the change process he was involved in had ended. One intermediate company contacted him shortly after his decision to leave, asking if this assignment would interest him. He agreed on the appropriate time to leave his position and start this assignment. This interim assignment was initially full-time, and the initial length was planned to be 3,5 months. Seymour thought, *We'll see how it continues then*. He served as the interim CFO of the client company in this assignment and was a member of the management team. The company had been searching for a new finance manager but had not found the right person. The impetus for hiring an interim manager was the need to complete year-end financial work and prepare the financial statements. The search for a

permanent financial manager continued. Seymour reckoned that the company also wanted to get some senior-level advice on its financial management processes, which it could obtain from this interim arrangement.

For Seymour, the primary difference between interim management and employed work stemmed from the level of expertise and competence required for the work. He said the expectations for an interim manager were always higher. According to Seymour, interim management required over-competence. An interim manager did not come to learn but had to manage it and perform from the beginning. Conversely, in an employed work setting, there needed to be room for learning and growing into the position.

For Seymour, the company he worked for needed to have a solid business idea and allowed him to develop the organization, its personnel, and grow his expertise. Improving the company's viability was also important. He told a story about a company in which he had worked, where, starting from day one, the message had been that making money was the most important thing, which had bothered him immensely. He said they had not internalized a developmental mindset in the company. Of course, turning a profit was also important, but it should be the result of doing the right things in the right way. This occurred by developing the personnel and the organization and, through that, creating a successful long-term operating model. He said that if you wanted to make money fast, it would end just as fast.

*“But considering my own career, it’s hard to say what my own desire is ... anyway, I like to get to such assignments where you can identify those situations that are important and how you can improve the doings of the company and the happiness of the people in the organization.”*

Seymour found that in consultation, one could mainly just give advice and did not put oneself in the performance of the work, to the company and the activities. Conversely, in an interim assignment, he was included in the decision-making process, and his relationship with the company was more akin to an employment relationship. In interim management, the time span was so short that changing and developing the company's processes at that time was impossible. One could not make real change in such a short time (e.g. in six months). Real change required more time.

Seymour found that in his new assignment, he could learn yet another new type of business and how it was analyzed and led. He had never been involved in this type of business before, so it was totally new to him, which he found interesting. He also found it important that the company was bringing work to Finland and contributing to the development of Finnish society in this way. However, what he found most

important was that they listened, developed people, and sought to find an optimal way for the company to function.

Seymour said he would like to take on interim assignments and make a living from them. His retirement days were around the corner, maybe in seven years or so. He said even then, he would like to be in such a good fit that he could do this type of work. However, during the assignment, he was also open to possibilities concerning employment within this organization. He believed an employed position in this company might be a possibility. The job description of the role, as it was in this interim assignment, was too narrow, but it could be widened to include some group operations or similar responsibilities. Seymour said it would be good for his self-esteem if they asked him to come work for them – that it would provide evidence of his value to the organization. It was important that one could bring value to the organization and that the situation benefited both parties.

Eventually, the interim assignment ended, so that Seymour began working at the client company as a permanently employed CFO. The company found that the CEO needed more experienced support for the company's financial leadership. He thought the group had especially interesting plans for the future of this company. They had agreed that he could conduct some advisory work through his own company as a side business when he had time, allowing him to balance his work. So he could do his work as an employed CFO and some work as entrepreneur. He found that doing both was beneficial, as it kept him engaged in both. The work was interesting since they had long-term plans for the company, and the company's strategy was inspiring. The owner had a will to develop the company, and Seymour thought the company could bring well-being to Finnish society and provide benefits for a larger group than just the owners.

I had asked Seymour in our first interview what kinds of thoughts and feelings entrepreneurship and being an entrepreneur raise in him. He said there was a certain freedom in entrepreneurship; however, there was also the responsibility that came with the work performed. If you did poor work, you did not get more assignments. You needed to create credibility and create new assignments. For him, entrepreneurship was a mixed bag of responsibility and freedom.

For Seymour, work was all about using his expertise in developing companies. In interim management, one is involved in shorter periods and cannot be involved in the company's long-term development. However, in employed work, you can make the change that long-term development requires and perhaps also see its benefits in the future. For Seymour, it was important that he could still do advisory services to other clients as well through his own company. It was an important factor in his decision-making that this arrangement was possible when he considered whether to accept the employed position at the company. He found that he could apply his knowledge and expertise on a larger scale in this dual role, and not just for the sole

benefit of one company. This sums up quite well what was important for Seymour. He could do this in addition to his other work, which could be employed work or interim work. For him, the most important thing was that he could use his talent, expertise, and knowledge to help companies and make society better.

## 5.6 Clarissa's story

Clarissa had always been working hard. She first started working when she was around 14 and has been working ever since. She earned a Bachelor's degree and studied abroad. She also undertook additional studies during her career. Since she was highly open-minded and enjoyed being involved in development, she had ended up being involved in various development projects from the beginning of her career and had become immersed in the "digital hype". Digitalization has been at the core of her career ever since. As her positions and companies changed, her responsibilities grew heavier. She also joined management teams and worked abroad. She was headhunted by a company in Finland and led that firm's Finnish operations. The business was in a turbulent state, and its entire business logic was at a crossroads. She spent the next decade there running that business. She experienced a great deal and went through many phases within the company.

This job as a country manager was hectic, and the "quarter economy" was intensely present in the work. Your head was on the table after each quarter if you had not met the expected results. At this job all had to be taken out of people. After a quarter, you could breathe for a week before the next intense quarter squeeze began. Clarissa said it was quite consuming and incoherent; at that point, she began thinking more deeply about her leadership principles and what she believed good leadership entailed. When the organization faced major organizational changes, Clarissa said, "I have now given my all, thank you. It would be nice to stay, but for my own head, I want to do something else now." At that point, she considered doing something entirely different, but then COVID-19 hit, and a former boss persuaded her to work for a large corporation. Before starting there, she told them that she would be there for two years, and so she was. After two years, she said she "wanted to value-lead herself and value-lead work". She wanted to do something that reflected her values, do something where she could control her own schedule and decide with whom she worked.

Clarissa had already established her limited liability company before leaving her last employed job. When she established the company, she thought, *Well, then it exists*, and she could do some things through it if she wanted. After leaving employed work, she decided to start her entrepreneurship journey full-time. She received a call from an interim management intermediate company, which asked if she would be free and interested in this case she was currently in. She had been in contact with

some intermediate companies before, letting them know about her and that she was available. She had had a few other interesting potential cases in negotiation, but as this confirmed, she knew that this assignment would be full-time and accepted it without hesitation.

She had already had her first trade name in her twenties; by then, she had dreamed about having her own business. She believed she would someday become an entrepreneur. However, she had had such amazing work possibilities that had taken her to such interesting places that the time had never been right to start a company. At her last employment, the idea of entrepreneurship became clearer. She thought she had experienced a great deal and had a lot to offer. For now, at the beginning of her entrepreneurial journey, she was selling herself and her expertise as an interim manager. Although it suited her well, she eventually would want to start a company that did something more scalable.

Clarissa's assignment was an interim CEO position in a company. The role and purpose of the case were clear from the start; it was also clear that the role would be full-time. The assignment would last through the spring, but the exact length of the assignment was unclear. The company was searching for a new permanent CEO, and the end of the assignment depended on when they found one. Clarissa found this assignment rather easy and a good one to start her interim manager career with – to see what it was like and test her own capabilities. Her job was to keep things running during the interphase and perhaps providing some future-oriented input to the organization. This assignment took all her time, and she had only had some other minor work going on during the spring. Because it was full-time, it felt like she was working in the company as an employee. She also worked weekends, which made her laugh, as it was like when she was employed.

For Clarissa, getting excited was something that drove her. Excitement was a major driver in her work life and to be able to do things that she enjoyed. She thought interim management was a great way to try different things without worrying that they might look bad in a CV. She did not enjoy routine work; she preferred speed and high-risk situations. She enjoyed constantly entering something new and learning a great deal.

*“And I can accept work that I would have never applied for if they were jobs. It kind of opens up doors for you that I would have never opened otherwise. I feel like I'm just like a child again when I was in a candy store – like ‘Aa! Man, I can do that, and I have permission to be super-excited about this for like 4–5 months.’ And then, when the major push, in a way, is done, I have permission to get excited about something else.”*

By the second interview, she found that she had succeeded well in the assignment, which had been much easier than she had anticipated. She understood she had actually worked in incredibly challenging environments – in hyper-growth businesses where the requirements had been high and where she had gained a great deal of knowledge and understanding about many things. Compared to that, this assignment seemed like an extraordinarily easy environment. She had expected something rougher. However, she had broken down the assignment into manageable pieces, so she had these motivating bits of the assignment, and it was not the same all the time. She always needed a development project going on, so this project portion of the assignment helped with that. An interim assignment allowed her to say yes to things she would not normally have said yes to, and everything had surprised her in a good way.

Clarissa's well-being had been quite good as an entrepreneur while doing this assignment. She pondered that the organization might also differ from what she was used to. She had worked in exceedingly competitive organizations with many exceptionally talented individuals, and the workload had been enormous. You had to be tremendously tough and do more and better than others. However, in this assignment, drawing the boundaries proved to be much easier. She could take a holiday whenever she wanted; she just did not charge the client for the time. Clarissa wondered if maybe this was the kind of life everybody wanted to live. Sure, there was the uncertainty that you always needed to find the next assignment or project. However, she thought that it was most likely the reason why many started a company that they had control over what and with whom they worked.

Clarissa had not really taken any significant steps to promote her own business or engage in any sales activities. She was seriously committed to this company and her role there. She was very present at the office and put in a full workday there and pretty much did nothing else in between. She did even more than they expected of her and was extremely committed to the assignment. She found that when you performed a task under your own name, you had to give your all and a bit more than the client expected. She talked about how, in employed work, the commitment and intensity of working were perhaps a bit looser because you were married to the employer.

In interim manager's work she did not have to carry all the worries of the workplace with her. According to Clarissa, in employed work, you could not get rid of the worries concerning the company; it was an ever-revolving hamster wheel. She said even though she would be working more intensely on this assignment, the emotional load was lighter. If she were an employed leader and knew she would be there for years, she assumed that work-related matters would affect her private life more. Although she worked in the evenings and on weekends, she had more free weekends than she could remember ever having. She said since no one was paying

for the unlimited work or the extra working days, it was easier to draw the line at working. In employed work, you sold your soul in a way. Clarissa thought the roles of an employed leader and a business director were quite vague and were being redefined daily. So the limits of the work might be more difficult to hold because, in a way, the director defined the role herself.

*“But in a company, if you were in employed work, you’d be like... maybe the timeline thinking there is different – that you are there until the unlimited future, that things can come by anytime, and you often work with the long-term affecting things. While in this, in a way, I know when the timeline ends.--- And then when I’m – if I’m in employed work – this can be a very exceptional thought ... but [laughs] then I get in my own mind a compensation from carrying that responsibility all the time; in the long run, I am responsible for much more to that company. And then I also know the work does not end by doing ... I also know they are always waiting for you ahead.”*

Clarissa talked a lot about freedom when she talked about entrepreneurship. It was important to her. She also mentioned that, of course, some insecurity there in the beginning because you did not get a guaranteed paycheck or holidays. However, she did not fear the insecurity. Quite the opposite, she felt it was a possibility – that you could affect the situation and improve it. It was liberating to start considering future possibilities, knowing that in a few months, this one would end, and something else would come. She said this was something that employed work did not offer.

For Clarissa, the world was full of possibilities; even the uncertainty of interim assignments did not seem to bother her. Not knowing what was coming next was exciting. She had enough money in the bank that it did not stress her if she did not have work for a month or so. However, she found that having income from multiple sources was beneficial, so she was not overly dependent on any one thing.

*“... That, ideally, your income would come from many different places, and you could play with them according to how you feel at that point. And you would never have a stranglehold on your throat that if this fails, I will lose everything.”*

Clarissa talked a great deal about how entrepreneurship had amazingly opened up her thoughts and everything felt possible. For her, just establishing the company was a major step towards opening her eyes and expanding her mind.

*“It opens up, that I just established the limited liabilities company, so I feel like something would have exploded in my head; I see business ideas and things everywhere and, in a way, all things become possible when you already have (a*

*company), even though it's just one limited liabilities company where nothing is defined or no particular business would be in there. So I'm like, 'Oh man, you could do that.' Well, I have to think, and no, I have not done it yet, but the ideas keep coming in a whole different way – like when I went to do that start-up, so you know... (I understood) how you can do things on a low threshold."*

For her, entrepreneurship had been a longtime dream. Entrepreneurship was as easy as establishing a company and getting started. She thought it did not require a clear business idea or plan. She loved calling herself an entrepreneur. She had always admired entrepreneurs. In general, she admired courageous people who did their own thing. She thought she was quite entrepreneurial, but she had been doing it in organizations. She had given more than enough to these organizations and been a driving force and a business builder. Doing this for someone else bothered her a bit since she could be doing it for herself as well. For Clarissa, entrepreneurship was about freedom and possibilities – a means of maintaining her independence.

Clarissa did not know what her future would hold. In her younger days, she said yes to everything, which exposed her to amazing jobs and situations. Now she felt somewhat similar, although she found that working as an interim manager was most likely some sort of interphase for her. This phase allowed her to try different organizations so that anything could happen. If she now had to think about what she would do in five years, she would like to have a growing and successful company; however, she did not yet know what this company would do. She also pondered that she would like to have a good network and be known and valued for what she could bring to organizations. She had not excluded employment in general entirely but would have strict criteria if she were to return to employment. However, one thing she knew for sure: Even if she were to return to employed work, she would keep doing side work through her own company. This was a freedom she did not want to relinquish. She had not closed any doors regarding what she might want to do going forward. Ideally, it would be something with “real business”. She did not see just selling her time and expertise as a long-term solution.

*“Even if I were to go to employed work, one thing is for certain: At least in my own mind now, I will not end my own business, but it would enable me to do, in a way, a side income; then I could do some other business. My own company would always be there. That is a freedom that, in a way, I will not let go of.”*

## 6 Interpretation of the stories

### 6.1 Three narratives on liminality, identity and entrepreneurship

#### 6.1.1 The Liminars

*“But this is maybe this kind of interphase, which is good like that when you establish the company; then it can open up many different worlds of thought, and one road can lead to another. That is how I think of this now that this is this kind of a year. Let’s see what comes of this.”*

One narrative that emerged from the stories concerned entrepreneurship as a means of taking control back to one’s own hands and drawing the boundaries anew. The narrative of The Liminars differs significantly from the other narratives, as The Liminars have only just entered interim management and began as self-employed entrepreneurs, whereas the other narratives in which interim management and self-employed entrepreneurship has taken place for a longer period of time. This narrative constructs entrepreneurship as a means to regain control over one’s life and work, which had been lost in traditional employment. Entrepreneurship was viewed as an escape from something – typically severe ill-being in employed work as a director. Entrepreneurship was a way to draw boundaries between work and personal life. There was a typical storyline: graduating, working in different corporations, holding various positions, climbing the ladder of the company hierarchy, and working extremely hard. However, this was not the promised route to happiness. An employed director’s work was stressful and exhausting, and it often spilled over personal life. The workload was massive, and the responsibility weighed heavily at all times, even when not working. Entrepreneurship was a pivotal turning point in life and career. There were no clear business plans or plans whatsoever– only the present moment and a mix of emotions, ranging from excitement and freedom to uncertainty and insecurity. An interim manager’s work as an entrepreneur had been observed from proximity, and it was found to be an interesting way of working. Thoughts of whether interim management could be a suitable profession were

considered. The Liminars' professional experience was extensive and could be sold to companies. The former way of working, as an employed director, had also been highly entrepreneurial, but it had occurred within organizations, not for one's own company. A significant amount of responsibility had been carried in previous positions.

Employed work was seen as something that absorbs a person and takes over one's entire life. Drawing the boundaries between working and not working in an employed director's role had been difficult. The feelings of losing control over work had been significant. Entrepreneurship was about escaping employed work, but it was also about escaping a toxic and consuming work culture, as well as the exhaustion that resulted from it, rather than merely being employed. The fear of losing control was strongly associated with employed work and director positions that consumed one's life, making one financially and emotionally dependent on the employer. An employed director's work required selling one's soul; it was a way of life that required extremely much from an individual.

Employed work was considered to require an intense commitment for a long period of time (3–5 years when committing to employed work). It was considered being a final solution, something that one was stuck in and unable to leave. In employed work, one lost the ability to live in the moment. One could not leave employed work because of the strong dependence on the employer. All eggs were in one basket, and if that one thing was lost and one's personal economy depended on it, one lost everything.

For the Liminars, entrepreneurship meant independence and freedom: the ability to choose what was done, how much was done, and with whom it was done. Even if hard work and long hours were part of the interim assignments, these were in one's control. Jumping to entrepreneurship was not actually that big of a leap. In fact, work continued in a rather similar setting. There was no difference in the way of working between an interim manager and an employee in the same role within a company. And still, the experience of the work had changed. The fact that this assignment would end soon – that this was not permanent – released one from the heavy weight and stress over the work.

The motivational factors for work had much to do with well-being, seeing and learning something new, and having control over one's life – not only work life but personal life as well. Compared to before, living in the moment was now possible as entrepreneur. In employed work there was a constant hamster wheel of tasks where things were done and repeated because it was expected. The norms of what society and the employer's company culture considered a requirement, controlled life. Now, as an entrepreneur, one could manage one's own working hours, take a holiday, and have time for family. Now, there was time for children and friends, which had been impossible in employed director positions. The work tasks in the interim assignments

were not the most motivating, but one had deep respect for the assignments and gave their best effort to them. Although a great deal of over-competence was exhibited in the work the assignments required, this work arrangement also gave one space to breathe.

Entrepreneurship had also been considered a possibility earlier in the career. It had been a dream for some time, but the time had never been right for it. Eventually, entrepreneurship became possible when one had already decided to leave the employed job due to turning-point events within the organization. At that point, changes had occurred in the employed work organization, and there was deep self-reflection over one's life. Overall, testing entrepreneurship as a way of working was easy, as there were no work-related commitments at that point. There was also the freedom to try it. It was not forced but one's own decision. There was strong self-confidence over working as entrepreneur.

The risk of working through one's own company was low, as there was always the possibility of easily returning to employed work. Entrepreneurship could be tried to see if it was one's thing at all. Thoughts swirled with numerous business ideas and perhaps eventually growing a real business. However, there was really no acting on these ideas, as all time and energy was devoted to the interim assignments. It was thought that a more suitable time might come. In fact, no sales work was done during the interim assignment. Everything was given to the interim assignment and to managing the work-life balance. The commitment to entrepreneurship was perhaps intentionally loose, something that was hard to fail at if one was not really going for it all the way but just trying it out and having many possible options. If successful, carrying on this entrepreneur's path would be desirable. However, there was preparation in case entrepreneurship did not work out.

There was emotional freedom in being out of work when there was no work, as no one was paying for that time. It felt like there was no cheating anyone if one was out of work. There was a feeling of liberating separateness from the client company. Compared to employed work, an employed director did not have working hours and the one had the overall responsibility for the company. Being out of work was more difficult, as the responsibility seemed to follow to free time and holidays. The experience was that one should be working constantly, even when one was out of work, while on holiday, and on weekends. The problems of the work followed one everywhere in an employed position. The company's problems also kept one up at night. Drawing the boundaries was impossible.

There was experience that before one had been a career person pursuing positions and titles but realized that it did not make one happy. Disappointment was experienced towards the path one was expected to take, which involved securing great positions and earning a good income. It had not been satisfying but had ended in exhaustion and ill-being. Now, there was no need to think about promotions or

next steps in this organization or about the next career move. Living in the present was possible.

Knowing this assignment would end was liberating. It was possible to concentrate on pursuing what was best for the client and doing the work extremely well. Providing value for the client was important, which was possible without the politics and one's career aspirations interfering with the work. Clearly, although one would not be with this organization for long, there was a strong will to perform extremely well and even better than expected. The wish to learn something new all the time and gain new experiences was present. Something totally new could follow this assignment that one could learn from – something new to add to the work portfolio. Deciding what the next thing would be, based on one's interests and values, was possible.

Interim management was full of adrenaline, as there was always a fast start to an efficient takeover, followed shortly by the exit. The future was open and full of possibilities; anything was possible. The future was not planned extensively, and the interim management type of work did not allow for that either. Just a little before the assignment ended, agreeing to and taking on a new assignment was possible. As new assignments needed to start fast, they required fast decision-making. Things changed quickly, and one had to tolerate the uncertainty that came with the inability to plan ahead. Some thoughts about the future prevailed, but they were not yet solidified. There was a trust that good things would follow when one did things that one enjoyed. There was a desire to broaden the experience and enhance the CV.

This work in the assignment would not have been done had it been done in an employed position. The work was not up to the competence and there was over-competence for the interim position. There would not have been sufficient motivation for it for long. This way of working enabled one to try new things – things that would not have normally been taken because they might look bad on a CV or would be too risky. Other way around, one could also get such work that would not otherwise been able to get. New work could be taken with a low threshold since, if it would turn out to be a toxic culture or something else undesirable it was only temporary anyway, and in the worst-case scenario, the assignment could be exited.

However, there was some struggling with what to agree on regarding the assignment, what tasks could be invoiced, what tasks one should be involved in, and what the role was in the assignment. Sometimes, there was experience of confusion and frustration over this fuzziness concerning the details of the assignment. There was also the insecurity about finding the next work and anxiety over not knowing what was coming next. Despite the undesirable qualities of employed work, it was considered a more secure means of earning a living. There was stress, but there was also a positive mindset and a strong urge to convince oneself that work would come.

There was a belief that once the next assignment was found, any negative emotions would vanish.

There was pondering between continuing self-employment, growing “a real business”, or accepting employed work. The time perspective was relevant in the reflections about the future. Performing interim assignments and selling personal expertise for some time was possible, but this was not intended to be a long-term arrangement. Returning to employed work was left as a possibility, but there would be strict conditions on the type of employed work that could be accepted. If staying within entrepreneurship were possible, it would be the main plan, and employment would be an option if entrepreneurship did not work out. Growing a “real business”, as it was called, was a tempting idea, but now was not the time for that. The commitment primarily concerned personal well-being at this point, focusing on recovering from the exhaustive experiences of employed work and making time for family.

The experienced control now as an entrepreneur over what was done, with whom it was done, and how much was done, was, however, more or less an illusion. Assignments started and ended quickly, and the uncertainty about what kind of assignments were available greatly defined what work could be taken on. Control over what one did conflicted with not knowing what possibilities would arise. Would one refuse work to take a holiday without knowing when something else would come up? Would one take just about anything when one did not know when something else would come? Control and uncertainty were in constant conflict.

### 6.1.2 The Professional Interim Managers

*“... I do what I want. Maybe this is it. That I do what I want. That these projects are what I want to do, and I have not had in working life like that; I would have thought of the titles, money, status, but I like the work tasks.” - Elena*

Building a coherent and solid occupation and profession out of a liminal context is possible. In the narrative of The Professional Interim Managers, entrepreneurship was a tool that enabled one to do the type of work one wanted to do. The work was performed *for* the client companies *through* the interim manager’s own company. The activities were directed towards the client companies, and there was little effort to build anything more. This was the business model – the way of doing the kind of work that one wanted to do. For The Professional Interim Managers, there was no particular feeling of being an entrepreneur, but rather a sense of being an interim manager and a true professional in the area of expertise. Entrepreneurship was not really pursued as such, but it provided a good model for doing what one wanted. The Professional Interim Managers were not growing their own business; they were

simply employing themselves with the interim assignments, one after another, and perhaps doing some side assignments as consultation.

An interim manager's work as an entrepreneur was a preferred choice. Deciding to originally resign from employed director work and start interim managing work as an entrepreneur was one's own decision. The extensive experience in a specific area of expertise was an asset that could easily be sold through one's own company. The original decision to start this way of working stemmed from the need to explore and experience something new. However, in the background, there was also disappointments in work life as an employed director. There were both push and pull factors that were drivers to interim management and to entrepreneurship. At the beginning of the interim manager's path, this way of working was also a relatively low-risk possibility, as returning to waged work was always an option. Entrepreneurship enabled one to do what one wanted and how one wanted.

It was repeated that one had almost always been asked if one would come work at the client company; the answer had always been no. It was clear that returning to employed work was not an option. Outsiders had not always well understood this choice, and it had been challenged. People had questioned whether this way of working was a preferred choice or whether it was simply due to not having found a real job. This had happened at the beginning of the interim manager's career and may have been related to interim management still being a relatively unknown concept at the time. When the career step of becoming an interim manager was taken, this way of working was relatively unknown, and there were not many role models nor a well-established business model for this way of working. The rise of the freelance working was just beginning and was considered an atypical way of working. However, it also represented the idea that employed work was the norm, and entrepreneurship, as a deviation from that norm, could be considered a failure to conform to that norm. Therefore, one had to convince others that one was not seeking employment and that this was not a forced solution.

There was deep commitment to this way of working; no other way of working was even considered. It was these assignments one wanted to undertake – to use one's expertise to benefit the clients while developing oneself at the same time. The motivation derived from the substance of the work, and there was ability to make fast decisions regarding the work. A willingness to learn new things all the time prevailed. There was a pursuit to explore new businesses, companies, people, and challenges. The target of development was the client company and oneself.

The Professional Interim Managers wanted to decide for themselves what they did, with whom they did it, and how much they did it. Being able to decide for themselves and have control was important, and because of the satisfaction with this way of working, this need seemed to be accomplished well. Although the motivational factors for the work were mainly derived from individual needs and

desires, there was also a strong will to help the companies and use their expertise to benefit the clients. Providing value and exceeding expectations was crucial. A heavy load of responsibility over the assignment and the client company was carried throughout the assignment, even after it had ended. The Professional Interim Managers worked long, intense hours, and did not count the amount of work the assignments required. Holidays came if assignments allowed it, and working on holidays was also very typical. This was found to be part of the work; it was not forced but was one's own choice. Although it was exhausting at times, especially if there was too much work, it did not feel overwhelming. However, the difference compared to one's previous work life as an employed director was that now, the company's problems did not keep one up at night; there was a sense of separateness from the client that enabled this feeling of not carrying the company's problems with them. The intensity and project-type tasks, which entailed interim work, were energizing. Things started fast, requiring a rapid takeover and a great deal of work, after which the assignment eventually reached its end. Then, something new would come soon, and the intensity and adrenaline would continue to surge. Meeting new people and facing new situations was exciting and energizing.

Work came through networks. This is why maintaining a good reputation, completing the assignments well, and preserving one's personal brand were paramount. Typically, there was no need for sales work, but they were being contacted about new work. It was very important to take care of the networks and remind time to time about oneself to the networks. Providing value to ensure their personal brand and reputation remained strong was crucial for attracting new work. This was their way of marketing and doing sales work.

The primary interest and motivation for this way of working had to do with the substance of the work and the work tasks; there was no interest in traditional markers of success such as titles, status or money. Of course, good compensation was received for the work and their expertise; however, money and status were not the primary motivational factors. Entrepreneurship was about being able to do such arrangements that brought value to the client and enabled freedom to decide for oneself what was done.

This also meant the assignments could be terminated at any time by either party, bringing high uncertainty to the work; however, there was no worry about finding new work. A positive attitude towards the future and a belief that new work would eventually come prevailed, although it might take time. It was part of the business that it was unknown whether a week or three months would lapse between assignments. Typically, some additional work accompanied the main assignment so also in between assignments there was some work. Thus, one could also then take care of family matters. Earlier in the beginning of the career as interim manager, managing the insecurity of not knowing whether work would come was more

difficult. However, experience had proven that work always came. One assignment ending always held the possibility of starting something new.

There were two reasons for carefully selecting which assignments to take. First, taking only such assignments that were interesting, exciting, and from which something new could be learned was important. Although there was little interest in titles or status, how the assignments would appear in one's professional work portfolio was carefully evaluated. Having control over what one's professional brand looked like and how different types of assignments affected this brand was important. For one's own well-being, avoiding assignments where the culture was toxic was important, but it was just as important to avoid situations where the wrong kind of client or just repeating similar work consecutively would damage one's professional brand. Ensuring professional growth by avoiding repetition was essential. When something interesting presented itself and one got excited, decisions were typically made fast and without hesitation.

Leading the interim assignments and being in charge was the responsibility of Professional Interim Managers, who presented clear ways and routines for negotiating the project, taking it over, seeing it through, and ultimately delivering it onwards. The client was not expected to dictate what to do or how things should be managed, but the lead was in their hands in good cooperation with the client. A way of working had been created for interim work – a mental playbook over how the interim manager's work was performed – and there was no experience of uncertainty or confusion.

The timeframe in interim assignments was short. There was no time to get very deep into the business and the company. It was project-type of work, in which interim manager had to also consider the long-term effects for the company. The work was very hands-on, short-term work. However, the work was performed in a very employee-like manner since there was full control over the work, and decisions were made similarly to those of an employed director. There was no particular difference in the way of working whether the work was performed as an interim manager or as an employed director. The client's best interest was prioritized; hard work and objectivity in their work were for the client's benefit. Although The Professional Interim Managers were not inside, neither were they outside. In some client companies, the position was more inside the organization whilst in others, a blurry line separated the interim manager from the organization and the client. The position kept the interim manager on the outer ring of the organization – in some more than others.

The near future could not really be planned in this type of work, as one could only accept new work as the assignment came to a close. The assignments started fast, with no waiting time. It was merely a feature of the work – neither positive nor negative – just business as usual. However, this had been a negative issue at the

beginning of the interim manager's career; this insecurity had been a concern. However, the experience had taught that new assignments would come, dispelling the insecurity. Overcoming the overwhelming feeling of insecurity of obtaining new work was important for the entrepreneur to keep pace with their career, as otherwise, it might have become too stressful.

Clients benefited from the desire to maintain a very good reputation, resulting in always receiving excellent quality work and only work that provided value. The Professional Interim Managers were typically over-competent for the role, enabling high-quality work and value from day one. Strong professional integrity ensured that work was always done well, and the client was never left in a difficult situation.

In this type of work, something new was always coming – some new business to learn. There was no emotional attachment to the client companies; it was clear that the assignments came to their end. There was no dependency on any client, as the assignments came and went, and a new one would follow. A pleasant atmosphere at the client company was merely an added bonus.

The positioning of the Professional Interim Managers and the career was quite stable and calm. A will to continue this path persisted; this was the way of doing the work, and there was no intent to change this setting. What changed constantly were the assignments. Just as the near future could not really be planned, longer-term career planning was not given great consideration. Living in the moment was important. However, life events affect this stability. Inevitable circumstances, such as approaching retirement, forced one to consider what would come and how ageing would affect the ability to do this kind of intensive work. Although things were stable now, change was inevitable.

### 6.1.3 The Purpose-Driven Shuttlers

*"I try to use the same expertise that I use anyway. That I would do if I was employed."* - Seymour

The Purpose-Driven Shuttlers had a strong desire through one's work to be involved in something bigger than oneself – something that made the world a better place. The companies for which the work was performed needed to have a purpose and a developmental mindset. Improving the companies and their personnel and developing them further was important. In a similar sense, it was essential that expertise could benefit multiple companies, rather than just one. This was resolved by the ability to do some side assignments through one's own company, even if one was in an employed work position. This way, expertise can be utilized even more and on a wider scale. Entrepreneurship was also a way that one could enter some

work if it required working through one's own company, not in employment. Entrepreneurship was the tool in the toolbox, ready to be used when needed.

The Purpose-Driven Shuttlers lacked the traditional narrative elements of a career, such as a turning point and a clear plot. There was long experience, deep expertise and multiple different ways that work had been done. The interest was strongly in what was done in the companies. It was secondary in which position or role this was done, but the substance of what the company had been involved in and what they had done was at the core of interest and decision-making.

Perhaps a lack of coherence and chronology stems from our tendency to view a career as a chronological and coherent story of one thing leading to another, with each move having a logical reason behind it. However, for The Purpose-Driven Shuttlers, this was not how their career was seen as. The focus was less on oneself and on the roles, positions, and hierarchies that we are accustomed to viewing careers. If a possibility arose that seemed interesting enough, it was pursued. It did not matter if it was employed work or work performed as an entrepreneur, the distinction was irrelevant. What the role was called for was also irrelevant. Work was not really applied or pursued; there were no clear career goals or targets to accomplish in the traditional sense that we are accustomed to understanding career goals. The work itself was what mattered. There was a strong wish to learn about new businesses, help companies, and use one's expertise. The companies' development and the companies' personnel were central to why work was done. There was a will to provide value, no matter what was the way it was done, not just to work somewhere. A willingness to positively impact society in general prevailed, and it was essential that the companies had a good mission.

One's own company was established at some point in the career, as it was one way of using the expertise for the benefit of the companies. However, entrepreneurship was no particular turning point in life, or a culmination point of anything. Consultation and interim work had been performed through one's own company for rather short periods between different periods of employment. One's entrepreneurship was like a place to return when employed work had ended or no longer provided what was wanted. Entrepreneurship meant one was never without work because entrepreneurship and doing whatever work through one's own company could always be returned to. Entrepreneurship was one tool in a toolbox of different ways of working.

The focus was greatly in the moment, not wondering a lot about the future. Hope about continuing to do this type of work for a long time prevailed, so there was no need to alter this arrangement. However, life events do not escape anyone, and the future was present in this sense in the construction of one's career, particularly through inevitable events such as future retirement.

Taking and leaving employed work was natural and seamless. Leaving always happened with the company's interest in mind. A career was a sequence of various work, and landing new opportunities always depended on new possibilities emerging. Opportunities mainly emerged through one's own networks or through headhunters. This was why performing the work in the best possible way and looking at the company's interest, regardless of whether the work was performed through own company or via employment, was always in one's best interest. It all came down to oneself as a person.

Fast decisions about changes could be made if situations required it. If something interesting came along, the opportunity was quickly seized without hesitation. Working for companies as an interim manager was typically short-term; thus, long-term development could not be seen at the time. In employed work, one could also be involved in long-term development. Depending on the need, one could select the appropriate tool from the toolbox that best suited the situation at hand. Regardless of what the main work consisted of, being able to do side work through one's own company was also important. This was how the experience and ability to develop companies could be scaled as much as possible.

## 6.2 Building identity and career in under-institutionalized roles

### 6.2.1 Under-institutionalized role of interim manager

Why is it relevant whether an individual can build a solid professional identity? In the case of non-standard ways of working, the question is significant. Identity building in non-standard work settings is crucial, as independent work in non-standard settings is more demanding. A viable professional identity makes the precariousness tolerable and turns it generative, providing the individual enough freedom to continue growing in this setting. When operating outside formal organizations and established roles, like that of an interim manager, crafting work identities can become problematic (Petriglieri et al., 2019).

This study has used the term *liminal work-life* to describe the type of modern work-life in which work can be performed in myriad ways and forms, some of which are new, not established in society, and difficult to define. The work of an independent entrepreneur interim manager can be considered a non-established way of working. First, this type of work lacks clear role models that define what this type of work is. Second, it is not a very well-known way of working for the public. Third, it is unclear what the demands are for this way of working and how this type of work should be organized. There is hardly a predictable future or secure affiliation in this type of work, which is deemed necessary for constructing a stable work identity

(Petriglieri et al., 2019). Although interim managers are hardly in precarious situations, given their high education, experience, and expertise, and typically have many doors open to them, from a work arrangement perspective, they are independent workers – part of the gig economy. They are, in that sense, in a precarious setting.

Ibarra and Obodaru's (2016) updated conceptualization of liminality finds that modern-day liminality is often less finite and more open-ended or can even be permanent. In their modern-day conceptualization of liminality, they extended the concept to six renewed assumptions: a) uncoupled or sequential role and identity suspension, b) open-ended / extended time period, c) self-guided process / self-made communities, d) incomplete and/or culturally problematic narrative, e) voluntary nature and outcome that can be uncertain, and e) multiple outcomes are possible. They argued that there has been a shift from classic liminality to under-institutionalized liminal experiences, in which identity work greatly differs from that which occurs in classical, institutionalized liminal states (Ibarra & Obodaru, 2016). Under-institutionalized liminal phases require more agency from the individual and are more challenging than more institutionalized liminal experiences. This is because they lack guidance or support for identity crafting and have fewer resources for making sense of ambiguous feelings, which may lead to ambivalence about their situation (Ibarra & Odobary, 2016).

When examining the narratives of this study in light of the modern-day liminality (Ibarra & Obodaru, 2016), the narratives of the interim managers express the described elements. In the narrative of *The Liminars*, liminality is expressed in many ways as they experience a range of emotions, from enthusiasm and excitement to uncertainty and anxiety. The liminal experience was ongoing as the time span was still short; the transition to entrepreneurship and interim management had just begun. In this narrative, the time period of the liminal state was open-ended; there was no clear path or goal to follow, nor a timeline for this change to occur. There were only limited role models for how an interim manager's work should be performed. No predefined steps were laid out to work through the liminal state, as there was no clear end-state to target. There were experiences of separateness from the client organization in ways that was liberating yet confusing, as sometimes there was an unawareness of how to behave or act in the role. There was a lack of *communitas* to which one could attach and belong, as it was known that the assignment in this organization was only temporary and would soon end. There was no other *communitas* to which to attach, such as a community of interim managers or other self-employed professionals. The culturally problematic nature of working as an entrepreneur interim manager can be clearly seen in the narrative of *The Professional Interim Managers*. When starting as an entrepreneur interim manager, the way of working was often misunderstood, as one was questioned whether they were only

doing this because they could not get “a real job”. Even after many years, there was still a need to convince the audience that choosing this way of working was a deliberate decision. There were constant propositions to work for the client companies, but continuing to work this way was a matter of one’s own will.

In the context of our entrepreneur interim managers, their way of working can be considered under-institutionalized, as interim management remains somewhat unfamiliar to many and is not yet established, even among business leaders. Neither does entrepreneurship provide a clear context for interim managers, as even though they work as self-employed entrepreneurs, their entrepreneurship is not typical in the sense of how we are accustomed to viewing entrepreneurship. They are not growing their own business but developing someone else’s. Identity building is especially difficult for individuals working within under-institutionalized settings (e.g. independent workers), as they lack clear reference points for codified and established roles (Petriglieri et al., 2019). Interim manager work performed as an independent worker through one’s own company is not explicit, well-known, or institutionalized, as it lacks the stability and predictable future which are needed to build a stable work identity (Sennett, 1998; Ashforth et al., 2008).

When examining Ibarra and Obodaru’s (2016) concept of modern-day liminality, as presented in this study’s narratives, entering interim management had been a preferred choice in all narratives at some point. The outcomes of the liminal phase were or had been uncertain, which could be best understood from the narrative of *The Liminals*, as all doors in this narrative were open, and no definite goal or outcome was pursued. A floating state enabled one to focus on this moment. There did not seem to be any particular outcome from the liminal state, but there was also the possibility that it could become permanent. In a way, the narrative of *The Purpose-Driven Shuttlers* tells a story where liminality became permanent. In this narrative, there was no clear goal, but one could transition fluently between different statuses, ways of working and organizations. Objectively viewing the state that *The Purpose-Driven Shuttlers* were in what might seem like a very liminal state; however, the experience was not expressed as liminal.

From the perspective that we tend to view ways of working, all the narratives seemed to somehow be in liminal states characterized by under-institutionalized roles, as none were in long-term, typical working arrangements, such as permanent employed work position or building their own company in the form of entrepreneurship. However, only *The Liminals* expressed liminal experiences and emotions, highlighting that liminality is never an objective state but is always a subjective experience. From the normative perspective we tend to adopt when examining different situations and ways of working, all the narratives were liminal. Our tendency to draw boundaries between different ways of performing work directs our thinking towards what we tend to consider typical and what as non-typical; what

as liminal and what not. The time span of the narratives highlights why The Liminals expressed subjective liminality while The Professional Interim Managers and The Purpose-Driven Shuttlers did not. The Professional Interim Managers and The Purpose-Driven Shuttlers had built a solid professional identity for their way of working over the years, suggesting that a coherent professional identity can be achieved in under-institutionalized roles over time. The following chapter provides an understanding of this identity-building process.

## 6.2.2 Needs of separation and belonging

In the narratives, the time span is important. The Professional Interim Managers had already been repeating the way of working for some years already whilst The Purpose-Driven Shuttlers had been doing interim management over the years, among other ways of working, and did not express change or a turning point in this phase of the career. Compared to the Liminals, for whom working as an interim manager was a new phase – a turning point in their career – the time span and expression of time differed in the narratives. The Liminals expressed time in a way that denoted this was a turning point – the beginning of something new. The Professional Interim Managers expressed that this way of working was performed for many years and was ongoing. The Purpose-Driven Shuttlers did not express any beginning or career-related turning-point at all. The beginnings and endings were tied to the companies where the work was performed, not to the career. Time span is relevant in identity building. Identity growth requires a liminal phase, during which one can explore various identity possibilities. The liminal phase is necessary and cannot be cut off prematurely (Ibarra & Obodaru, 2016). The varying narratives were in different phases of the time continuum. This setting necessarily influences the analysis since the narratives are not directly comparable, as their liminality differs. In the narratives of The Professional Interim Managers and The Purpose-Driven Shuttlers, the objective liminality has become permanent, as it is no longer subjectively liminal. This aspect of time also plays an essential role in the analysis.

Identity is never built from a blank slate, but rather upon previous identities that are formed through experiences and actions. In the narratives of this study, the professional leader's previous identities were strong and had been developed over a long period. The new aspects of identity building depend on the time span of the change. Initially, as individuals start their new careers as independent entrepreneurs and interim managers, they enter a state of liminality in which they are neither one nor the other – neither a director nor an entrepreneur but something in between. An enduring change requires forming a new identity, which can be achieved through a liminal process; this process entails the phase of separating from the old. In the identity work of the interim managers, it is critical not only to look at the question

of *belonging* or, in other words, “Who am I?”, but also, with the same importance, to pay attention to the question of “Who am I not?” which can also be described as separating oneself from something. This something can be a previous identity or another possible identity. In a liminal state, when a significant career-related change has occurred, separating from the previous identity is necessary to make room for something new. In this setting, where there are only limited role models and *communitas* available, building a sense of belonging to social groups becomes challenging, and building identity through the question of “Who am I not?” can become easier.

When individuals get detached from valued identities, they experience social or existential distress and strive to find new roles and identities to which they can attach. A director’s identity, rooted in a long and impressive foundation, can be a strong identity and a clear and valued peer group to which to attach. Separation can be painful, requiring the determination and courage to leave this peer group in search of something new. In the role of an entrepreneur interim manager, one does not entirely leave one’s position and status, as they continue performing the work of a leader, albeit not in a traditional leader’s role. Determining the role, the identity, and the institution from which they are separating is important. The separation from the previous role is, in this case, only partial, as a part of the previous director’s identity remains, even though the work itself continues and is similar, albeit in a different context. This can also result in identity conflict (Nielsen & Gartner, 2016; Demetry, 2017), where the director’s identity clashes with the emerging and still potentially weak identity of a self-employed entrepreneur or something else. This type of standing carries a risk of resulting in premature identity regression from the liminal state back to the former identity, as there is no clear and total separation from the earlier identity. Especially if reinforcing and successful experiences are not achieved in the new way of working, premature withdrawal from the liminal state can occur without the new identity being established. People can close their options too quickly to avoid dealing with the negative emotions of being in between (Ibarra & Obodaru, 2016).

Petriglieri et al.’s (2019) study on independent knowledge workers management of work identities found that in the absence of organizational and professional membership, as well as the anchors and buffers an organization provides to an individual, work identities become precarious and personalized. The lack of *communitas* (i.e. peer groups) makes identity building more difficult for interim managers due to the absence of social groups to which they can attach and become part of. For the interim managers in this study, the client organization is what Czarniawska and Mazza (2003) refer to as a *liminal organization*, a place that is, for many, a non-liminal place – a place of everyday work; however, for the interim managers, it is a place of only temporary visit. Without a strong attachment to an

organization, obtaining and maintaining a stable work identity is difficult (Sennett, 1998; Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). As Petriglieri et al. (2019) well put it in the context of independent workers, also with the interim managers in this study, they are *working, not belonging* in the client organization.

In search of identity, we must build a sense of belonging through socio-spatial contexts of attachments and connections to places, people, internal emotional landscapes, and value systems (Durakovic et al., 2024). When the sense of belonging does not come from work at the client companies, it must be found elsewhere. One's experiences should align with those of others in the group to feel a sense of belonging. At the core of one's identity is the psychological ownership we develop over our work, which builds motivation, performance, and satisfaction (Durakovic et al., 2024). Understanding that the organization is not the only thing one can commit to and build a sense of belonging with is important. Generally, many individuals have a higher level of commitment to their profession and occupation than to their organization (Anteby et al., 2016). Belonging is essential in identity building, but belonging can occur within various constructs, such as organizations, professions, occupations, or purposes. In searching for belonging, a central foundation is the feeling of being valued, needed, and important to others (Durakovic et al., 2024).

When talking about occupations, we must recognize that what we consider "occupations" are, in fact, really just socially constructed multiple realities. These multiple realities stem from individual understandings of categories of work that hold particular task areas to specific and enduring groups of people who have gained "membership" in these occupational categories through the institutional markers that define these categories (Anteby et al., 2016; Abbott, 2005). Anteby et al. (2016) argue that occupations can be understood through "becoming", "doing", and "relating", where *becoming* is understood by how the individuals are socialized into the occupational community, *doing* by how occupational tasks and practices are performed, and *relating* by how occupational members build relations with others. In identity formation, these three can be viewed as a lens through which identity can be expressed and built. This is a lens we need to remember as we look at how the narratives approach the question of "Who am I?" There are only limited role models and peer groups to whom the interim managers can attach, and client organizations do not provide a social community. Relating to an occupational community also becomes impossible if this community does not exist. Therefore, "doing" plays the most significant role in building a sense of belonging when other social factors are lacking.

The lack of organizational membership creates a space of emotional tensions varying from anxiety to fulfilment. This lack must be filled with something else in situations of non-typical work since the organizational membership and its

associated structures are unavailable. The framework of the intelligent career (Arthur et al., 1995) has distinguished between three essential competencies in managing the boundaryless work-life. These can be considered as a framework for career behaviour, influencing the decision-making of individuals within their careers in non-typical work (see e.g. Arthur et al., 1995; Guan et al., 2019). This framework helps us understand how belonging can be built in this type of context. The framework is based on three distinct “ways of knowing”: knowing-why, knowing-how, and knowing-whom (Arthur et al., 1995; Parker et al., 2004). These different ways of knowing interact with one another and affect career behaviour. They are also the key components in managing the boundarylessness, or liminal, work-life. *Knowing-why* refers to personal meaning, purpose, and identity as well as one’s motivation and values. *Knowing-how* refers to the skills and knowledge required for a particular task or work. *Knowing-whom* refers to one’s personal and professional relationships that help develop their career (Parker et al., 2004; Arthur et al., 1995). Knowing-why and knowing-how are dynamically shaped in interaction between others (knowing-whom) (Hennekam et al., 2021).

Hennekam et al. (2021) studied the sustainable careers of interim managers and their career communities, arguing that in these communities, different ways of knowing are developed through interaction between the individuals and the community. In these communities, individuals build a sense of belonging and distinguish themselves from others (Hennekam et al., 2021). Hennekam et al. (2021) focused their study on the occupational career communities of interim managers, arguing that in these career communities, individuals develop a sense of belonging and identity within the profession. Knowledge about the profession and the way of working is developed in these communities through learning from one another (Hennekam et al., 2021). In these communities, one’s feelings of belonging are enhanced in fostering one’s individual and professional identity and at the same time helps the individuals make sense of their profession and way of working. According to Hennekam et al. (2021), “through social interaction with others, members of the community create a shared understanding of what it is like to be an interim manager”. They build a narrative of what it means to be an interim manager. As this research demonstrates in the following chapter, professional communities are not a necessary prerequisite for building an identity in a profession, but identity building without communities is even more challenging for the individual and will likely take more time.

Pointing in the same direction as the *knowings* of the intelligent career, Petriglieri et al.’s (2019) study on self-employed knowledge workers found that they created their own personal holding environments, enabling them to express, define, and develop themselves. These holding environments helped them “stay at work”, meaning they found the perseverance to stay in their chosen way of working. These

self-created personal holding environments prevented premature identity regression, helped them manage their emotions, make sense of their situations, and turn their precariousness into a manageable and even a productive space (Petriglieri et al., 2019). These personal holding environments are comprised of routines, spaces, people, and purpose, which provide the control that helps individuals bind themselves to their work and build a sustainable and viable work identity that enables them to manage multiple emotions and render the precariousness of the work tolerable (Petriglieri et al., 2019).

Returning to the importance of time span, it is worth noticing that in Ibarra and Petriglieri's (2010) study, "identity play" in under-institutionalized liminal settings increased the likelihood of identity growth. In identity work, one has a goal to work towards, whereas identity play is an iterative process of exploring possible future selves at the threshold between reality and future possibilities, where commitment is only provisional (Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010). Identity play involves playful efforts, such as delaying commitment and exploring possible identity options. When role models are limited and the targeted role to which to identify is ambiguous, identity play is necessary until an individual begins to form an understanding of the targeted role and what it entails. At that point, identity play can turn to active identity building. This suggests that identity building cannot be rushed but must be given sufficient time, especially in under-institutionalized settings where the targeted role is unknown or ambiguous.

In building an identity, whether the targeted role is clear or not, it is necessary first to separate from the old identity to be able to start building a sense of belonging to something new. In a way, The Liminars seemed not to entirely relinquish their previous manager's identity, as it brought them the security of a place that could be returned to if other plans would not succeed. Delayed commitment is associated with identity growth because nascent selves develop over time; this is particularly essential when more established competitive identities exist – even if they are outdated (Ibarra & Obodaru, 2016). Developing identities takes time, allowing for the identity to become authentic. This leads us to take a closer look at how identity was constructed in the three narratives of this study by examining the time span, the separation from the old, and the process of building belonging to the new in the narratives.

#### 6.2.2.1 The phase of separation

The Liminars expressed significant emotions, such as excitement and insecurity, which are commonly associated with liminal states. The time span for The Liminars was short, as the expression of time was tied to being at the beginning of something new after a turning point in a career. The Liminars defined their identity more from

the perspective of *who they were not* rather than who they were. The Liminars were not the ones who were doing things just because it was what was expected of them; instead, they did things on their own terms and lived according to their values. They were not on the hamster wheel of excessive work and exhaustion but had taken control over their work and their lives. They were not the ones doing what was expected from the outside but took control of their lives and at the same time were drawing a line between themselves and the employed directors they used to be. They were separating themselves from the lifestyle of an employed director. However, identification and disidentification are not necessarily strict opposites (Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001). As Carroll and Levy (2008) state, disidentification can be oversimplified and may not have a positive counterpart of something to identify to. In the narrative of The Liminars, there was no clear positive counterpart with which to build identity because of the role's under-institutionalized nature. They had to develop themselves an understanding of what this role entailed. In this setting, drawing from the question of "Who am I not?" was easier. However, this is insufficient in building a coherent identity in a liminal state and therefore it requires the clarification of the targeted role.

The *knowing-why* for The Liminars was mainly attached to one's well-being, and, in general, to oneself. There was not much expressions of a wider purpose or altruistic values at this point in their career – the focus was on oneself – but this does not mean none existed. The Liminars had not yet gained sufficient experience to establish a way of working as an interim manager, and they faced challenges due to not always knowing the right course of action or what should be agreed upon with the client. The *knowing-how* was limited in this sense. The expressions of communities, connections with others, and peer support were not significant. There was a lack of *knowing-whom*. The Liminars wanted to live life according to personal values and work to integrate to this, which is considered an essential factor in a boundaryless career (Guan et al., 2019). This generally reflects an individualistic view towards the world and careers. In the narrative of The Liminars, individualistic motivations and aspirations, such as taking control over one's life, as well as personal well-being, personal life, and work-life balance, played a larger role than in the narratives of The Professional Interim Managers and The Purpose-Driven Shuttlers. The *knowing-why* of The Liminars was much attached to themselves. Returning to the boundaryless career that relies heavily on individualistic motivations and aspirations, it is reasonable to ask whether a solid identity can be built if one is only focused on one's own individual needs, values, and goals, without the boundaries or framework that binds an individual to something greater than themselves – *something to belong to*. The Liminars still lacked this something to belong to.

The Liminars were in a phase of identity play and delayed commitment (Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010). They seemed to intentionally keep the door open for returning

to employed work, despite it not being a preferred choice. The Liminars were in the phase of separating from the old. They had not yet reached the point of building belonging to something new. The short time span in this narrative affected that this phase of building belonging had not yet been reached. It is also possible that the phase of finding something upon which to build identity may take a long time or even perhaps never come even as time passes. The phase of separation from the old is essential to identity building in a liminal state, such as that of The Liminars, and the phase of building identity in something new must be given sufficient time.

#### 6.2.2.2 Building an identity in the way of working

The Professional Interim Managers expressed a strong identification with their work as interim managers – as professionals in their own area of expertise. Identity was incumbent upon them being independent interim managers, and through not being waged employees. The identification with entrepreneurship was vague; entrepreneurship as an identity did not play a significant role in shaping their lives. The response to the question of “Who am I?” was expressed through being interim managers and professionals in their knowledge area. There was also a coherent response to the question, “Who am I not?”, expressing that they were not being employed employees and would never be. They wanted to draw a line between themselves and the employed leaders by expressing reassurance that they would never accept employed work. Their identity work was strongly attached to this separation of what they were not and what they would not become. Similarly, they expressed a strong identification with the way of working as interim managers. The Professional Interim Managers expressed the *knowing-why* through expressing the will to provide extreme value for the customers and to develop oneself. Although there was only little expression of entrepreneurship playing a significant role in the identity building of The Professional Interim Managers, their activities reflected strong entrepreneurial action, which was directed towards and for the benefit of their client organizations.

The *knowing-how* was very clear to The Professional Interim Managers, and they had a highly structured approach to the work as interim managers; a mental “playbook” had been developed for the assignments, sales, and the way of working. The definite temporariness of the assignments functioned as a strong structural element, bringing boundaries and helping maintain control over the work and one’s life more broadly. This temporariness was also the way to separate and distinguish from the regular setting of the employed director’s work. This was also the guiding structure in decision-making, enabling their identity building in the liminal setting. The mental “playbook” of work enabled building a solid identity through the way of working. This framework, which could also be referred to as *personal holding*

*environment* (Petriglieri et al., 2019) or the *knowing-how* of the intelligent career, was the key to constructing a solid identity. Marcia (1966) introduced the concept of identity commitment, which involves individuals' willingness to commit to their personal and professional identities by choosing between considered options and engaging in activities that reflect these choices. A solid and coherent identity building from a liminal state requires one to make choices regarding different possibilities and commit to them through activity.

The significance of the temporariness of the assignments as a way to draw boundaries and maintain control could also be read from the narrative of The Liminals; however, not as much from the narrative of The Purpose-Driven Shuttlers. The Professional Interim Managers had established a way of "doing" the occupation they held, gaining the knowing-how of the intelligent career framework, as Anteby et al. (2016) talk about in *building identity to an occupation*. However, for the Professional Interim Managers, expressions of *knowing-whom* – about communities or connections with others – remained scarce.

The time span for The Professional Interim Managers was long, and there was expression that starting as an interim manager had been a turning point in career, marking the beginning of the self-employed interim manager's career phase. As The Professional Interim Managers had been practicing interim management for a longer period, many things had also changed at the societal level since the interim management career commenced. At the beginning of the interim manager's career, there was a struggle with social anxiety resulting from the social unacceptance and suspicion from peers. The general atmosphere in those days reflected the lack of social respect for this type of work – people not understanding what it entailed and the disbelief that someone would choose to do it by own choice. Assuring others that this was one's preferred choice was still a pressing issue. This negativity disrupted their sense of identity and posed an external threat that needed to be explained to the audience and themselves to protect and preserve their identity.

### 6.2.2.3 Building identity to purpose

In the narrative of The Purpose-Driven Shuttlers, there was expression of separating oneself from working for only one company. Belonging was built on the purpose of what was done and why, the will to help more than one company, and not limiting one's professional expertise, which would be impossible in a typical setting of an employed director. The question of "Who am I?" was answered through the profession, professional expertise, and the purpose of helping companies improve society. The Purpose-Driven Shuttlers drew no lines between themselves and other ways of working or being; in general, the narrative drew little upon "Who am I not?" There was no clear narrative about differentiating oneself from others, suggesting

that identity was built more on who one was rather than who one was not. This can also be seen as the key that enabled one to remain flexible – to have “the freedom to be whatever you need to be for others” (Turner, 1982). This way of working enabled one to fulfil the purpose and use the professional expertise. Creating a structured framework based on the purpose of the work, the *knowing-why*, enabled The Purpose-Driven Shuttlers to use liminality as a tool to perform their work well. The purpose could also be considered a structure for managing the identity and a framework upon which to base career-related decision-making.

Entrepreneurship held no particular significance for The Purpose-Driven Shuttlers in identity construction. There was a coherent understanding of the *knowing-why*; the grand purpose in the work was the guiding structure for decision-making and maintaining a coherent understanding of oneself. The will to provide the customer with high value was a significant part of the purpose. Similarly, as with The Professional Interim Managers, entrepreneurial activity was characteristic of The Purpose-Driven Shuttlers, even though they did not consider entrepreneurship to play a significant role in their professional identity. In the same sense as for the Professional Interim Managers, the entrepreneurial activities were directed towards the client companies’ benefit. Common good motivations were strongly emphasized – a purpose in the work that went beyond personal advantage to help as many companies as possible. The narrative effectively conveys how a grand purpose can become a construction and a part of the holding environment in a liminal state, serving as a foundation for identity building. The Purpose-Driven Shuttlers had developed a framework – *a knowing-how – a personal holding environment* for the way of working, which was driven by the purpose, enabling one to shuttle between different ways of working without being limited by the work arrangement in realizing this purpose. Petriglieri et al.’s (2019) study found that purpose was one element of the personal holding environments that makes liminality manageable. This purpose served as the mental “playbook” for The Purpose-Driven Shuttlers; this purpose could be fulfilled in many forms and ways, allowing for flexibility in different ways of working. This was the key idea that remained unchanged, even though surrounding circumstances and work arrangements might differ. For The Purpose-Driven Shuttlers, professional expertise and purpose were the foundation of the professional identity – something to belong to. It is noteworthy that similar to the other narratives, neither The Purpose-Driven Shuttlers expressed any particular professional communities as significant.

The Purpose-Driven Shuttlers expressed few emotions related to the liminal state. There was no expression of anxiety that would suggest the liminality for The Purpose-Driven Shuttlers had become structured and not only manageable but an asset. This would suggest that *permanent liminality* (see e.g. Beech, 2011; Bamber et al., 2017) can be objectively liminal but subjectively not liminal. Reed and

Thomas's (2021) study on corporate professionals' liminality found that corporate professionals (e.g. project managers) constructed themselves as liminars, embracing the indeterminacy of their work to remain on the threshold of different identities that enabled them to form and sustain a wide range of relations, adapt to different environments, and work with different people. They experienced that it was part of their work that they constantly changed their identity in relation to what their work required. In this sense, Reed and Thomas (2021) found that liminality also served as a tool for making sense and maintaining flexibility in between the needs of clients and others. In fact, embracing liminality was a crucial tool for them to perform well in their work, enabling them to construct a legitimate and sustainable professional identity. As Turner (1982) put it, there is a freedom to be whatever you need to be for others, reflecting the multi-layered nature of liminality (Reed & Thomas, 2021). In this sense, the narrative of The Purpose-Driven Shuttlers provides a new perspective in which a tool was built from liminality that enabled one to perform the work well – to change the position to whatever the client needed. The Purpose-Driven Shuttlers always transformed to what was in the best interest of the client.

### 6.2.3 The role of identity in self-employed careers

A solid identity can also be attained in under-institutionalized roles, such as that of an independent entrepreneur interim manager's. In the narratives of the Liminars, The Professional Interim Managers, and The Purpose-Driven Shuttlers, building a solid identity in under-institutionalized roles depends on the time span and requires separation from the old. However, separation is not yet sufficient for identity building, but as a *sine qua non* – a necessary precondition; one also needs to attach to and build belonging to something new. This belonging can be built to purpose, as was the case for the Purpose-Driven Shuttlers, or to the way of working, as in the case of The Professional Interim Managers. These different ways of building identity play a significant role in decision-making regarding one's career. Entrepreneurship and self-employment way of working can serve a very different purpose and role for an individual, depending on the identity it fosters, which affects the decisions one makes regarding their career.

Koch et al. (2021) categorized four types of self-employed career patterns: persistent, intermittent, necessity, and mixed self-employment careers. Persistent self-employment careers involve only a few transitions between self-employment and other employment states; these individuals remain self-employed for relatively long periods. Intermittent careers typically consist of only a few brief phases of self-employment. Mixed self-employment does not have any particular focus on a specific employment state; it often involves frequent changes in employment status.

A necessity self-employment career involves lengthy periods of unemployment between periods of self-employment.

In this study, the narrative of The Professional Interim Managers expressed a persistent self-employment career in which the actions, perseverance, and repetition of their way of working had enabled them to form a “playbook” for their way of working. Through this, a solid identity as an independent interim manager had been built. In comparison, the narrative of The Purpose-Driven Shuttlers indicated a career pattern of mixed self-employment, with minimal significance, if any, in the employment state in which the work was performed. However, this mixed approach to a self-employment type of career was an asset. For the Purpose-Driven Shuttlers, the guiding framework for the work was the purpose that enabled to maintain a solid identity as a professional in the area, driven by a clear purpose. The mixed approach to self-employment enabled the realization of this purpose. In the narrative of The Liminals, the self-employment career type remained undefined since they were in a liminal state and still amid the identity play phase.

Koch et al. (2021) found that individuals who are persistent in their self-employment have higher job satisfaction than those with other self-employment career patterns. The Professional Interim Managers clearly expressed satisfaction and commitment to the situation. This could indicate that persistence through action in the way of working enables the creation of a solid and viable identity, as well as the possibility of building a work life that fulfills their personal values and needs. There was no need to wonder about things anymore, nor was there any insecurity over how to deal with the assignments, which fostered self-confidence and stability. However, the narrative of The Purpose-Driven Shuttlers, which closely resembled the mixed self-employment career pattern, expressed similar satisfaction with the way of working. In this narrative, the identity was expressed as being rather stable, but it had been built on the professional expertise and personal purpose – an altruistic driver of the individual – which guided the decision-making.

Koch et al.’s (2021) study found that the satisfaction with work would not be as strong for the mixed self-employed as for the persistent self-employed. However, their finding was based on the mixed self-employed not being as committed to their way of working and their employment status. In their study, the mixed self-employment pattern was typically associated with low-wage and peripheral work. The narrative of The Purpose-Driven Shuttlers presents an alternative perspective on an established identity and a way of working that diverges from the normative way we typically view a career and ways of working. In this narrative, the identity did not seem to be disturbed by the boundaries between different ways of working such as those of an entrepreneur, an employed director, or another type of consultant work. These boundaries, typically viewed as strong normative boundaries between different ways of working, had vanished and could be easily crossed. The driver for

The Purpose-Driven Shuttlers was the purpose, and this career pattern of mixed self-employment suited their framework well. Had they been overly dependent on the way and status in which the work was performed, this would have limited the ability to fulfill the purpose and work according to this framework. This suggests the base of one's identity affects job satisfaction within different self-employed career patterns. In this sense, mixed self-employment can be an asset, allowing individuals to fulfill their own needs and those of their clients, creating a very fruitful setting that can lead to high job satisfaction.

It was noticeable that in the narratives of The Professional Interim Managers and The Purpose-Driven Shuttlers, drawing the boundaries was little mentioned. While in the narratives of the Liminals, boundaries and drawing them anew played a significant role, suggesting that The Professional Interim Managers and The Purpose-Driven Shuttlers had stabilized and institutionalized their position. In these narratives, the boundaries had been drawn anew and were no longer blurry, reflecting the subjectivity of boundaries as well. Boundaries are not positivistic, factual, or real-life constructions that occur to everyone similarly; rather, individuals set these boundaries through their personal sense-making. This would suggest that boundaries can also be self-created when there is desire to commit to something and there is sufficient activity and repetitions of this activity. In this type of liminal setting, the individual first creates the boundaries and then works towards the goal. This enables the formation of a coherent identity and an understandable career and commitment to something that in the beginning was only blurry and ambiguous.

Ibarra and Obodaru (2016) argue that under-institutionalized experiences, such as the role of an entrepreneur interim manager, can lead to the institutionalization of these roles if more individuals respond similarly. These experiences can become new institutionalized narratives to which individuals in similar conditions can build their identity and find a socially acceptable peer group to which to attach to. These role models are greatly needed in a world with more boundaryless careers and new ways of working for which there are not too many models yet at this point (Ibarra & Obodaru, 2016). This study shows that non-typical working arrangements can become structural and typical for individuals. These self-employed career types and ways of working can become typical role models through creating personal holding environments. These personal holding environments can be built from various sources, such as from structured ways of working, by creating a "playbook" or following a grand purpose. What is important is that if we build fierce boundaries between employed work and entrepreneurship and repeat the traditional narratives about what they are and have been, these new roles cannot strengthen and become institutionalized. This stagnant state of under-institutionalization again hinders individuals from attaching to these identities.

This research suggests that under-institutionalized ways of working can become institutionalized. However, without communities, peer groups, and someone to learn from, the road to discovering what it means to be an interim manager and how the work is performed may take a considerable amount of time and require perseverance. In all the narratives, there were no career communities or peer groups, which, according to Parker et al. (2004) and Hennekam et al. (2021), would facilitate the institutionalization of interim management and a sense of belonging among individuals in this community. These types of peer groups and communities could be valuable in institutionalizing the non-typical ways of work that Ibarra and Obodaru (2016) call for, which might be beneficial and bring tremendous good, especially for interim managers just beginning their career path.

#### 6.2.4 Entrepreneurship without being an entrepreneur

None of the narratives strongly identifies with entrepreneurship. This demonstrates well that the status of working as a de facto self-employed entrepreneur does not necessarily relate to identifying as an entrepreneur. Similarly, entrepreneurial activity is not necessarily related to entrepreneurial identity or working as a de facto self-employed entrepreneur. Entrepreneurship serves different meanings and purposes in the narratives, but in none of them does entrepreneurship play a strong role in the sense-making of identities and careers. A common thread in all the narratives was the expression of belittling their entrepreneurship, indicating that “real” entrepreneurship is something other than what they were doing. In the context of Finnish culture, self-employment can have versatile positive and negative aspects and social meanings. The narratives reflect that self-employment is not the same as entrepreneurship, or at least not the same as “real” entrepreneurship. According to the narratives, real entrepreneurship refers to growing one’s business. This cultural context can influence sense-making in narratives about entrepreneurship or self-employment. Self-employment can be a bridge or temporary tool in a liminal situation, as it was for The Liminars, or it can serve as a framework, being part of a personal holding environment – the role it played for The Professional Interim Managers. It can also be just another instrument for fulfilling a purpose, as it served for The Purpose-Driven Shuttlers.

Returning to the idea by Audretsch and Lehmann (2023) that the self-employed are not entrepreneurs since they do not have a story to tell. In some sense, this might apply to interim managers, but it seems they have a strong need to tell a coherent story to themselves about themselves. As Chapter 3.1 reads more precisely, we need to separate *entrepreneurship as a verb* and an activity and *entrepreneurship as a noun*, a status, or an identity. Entrepreneurship as an activity or a verb answers the question, “What am I doing?” while entrepreneurship as a noun, a status, or identity

answers the question, “Who am I?” This study’s narratives effectively convey the contingency of events and actions. As Ramoglou et al. (2020) put it, “the individuals who acted entrepreneurially need have not acted thus, and the individuals who did not act entrepreneurially, could have acted thus”. The narratives expressed significant entrepreneurial activity, which was, however, not directed towards the actor’s own business but towards and for the benefit of the client companies. This leads us to viewing entrepreneurship in these narratives through the lens of activity. Drucker (1985) states that “entrepreneurship is neither art nor science but practice”. Imagination can be valuable in designing business ventures (Johannison, 2011), but building a business, a career, and an identity is closely tied to action. Successful entrepreneurs use their time in a manner entirely different from what we have traditionally associated with business management. More precisely, they spend more time on concrete action and visioning, less on planning, with a greater emphasis on action than planning (Johannison, 2011). The same also applies to successful leaders and intrapreneurs (Johannison; 2011). This study’s narratives reflect Johannison’s (2011) discussion of entrepreneurship as a practice: *It is about getting things done*. And it is a matter of *where* you get things done, *what* you get the things done for, and *what the target* of your actions is. The interim managers dedicate all their energy, effort, and action to their interim assignments; their entrepreneurial activity is put to work *for* the client company’s benefit. They jump into action on Day One of the assignment. They take on the role quickly, plan fast, execute their work efficiently with maximum value for the client, and promptly transfer the role to the next person. The object of their entrepreneurial activity is the client company; their own company is merely an instrument for implementing this activity. For their own ventures, they had only visions and plans. These “opportunities” that, in a way, await their realization are only ideas; they do not exist anywhere in reality and, therefore, are not such opportunities that merely wait to be discovered and exploited (Ramoglou et al., 2020).

Especially, The Liminars saw business possibilities everywhere but did not act upon them. They thought the time was not right. Despite aspirations and dreams of growing a real business, there was no seizing the opportunity and taking action. The entrepreneurial activities were targeted towards the client companies. An expression of fierce will to manage the assignments above expectations prevailed. Providing value to the client and achieving the set goals of the assignments were important.

The stories of interim managers have a unique feature compared to many other independent workers: They are asked for many work, unlike those who need to actively seek it. Interim managers needed to maintain their networks, but none had to engage much time in active sales work. Work was often offered to them without having to put much effort into finding it. They had channels through which they kept their networks informed about them and what they were doing; that was their sales

and marketing. When they completed their client assignments extremely well and with high value for the client, ensuring the legacy of the assignment through a good exit, they secured their next career step, as they obtained good references and the potential for more demanding assignments (Browning & McNamee, 2012). They kept their own business alive by devoting all their energy, effort, and expertise to their clients, dedicating all their entrepreneurial activity to the benefit of the client companies.

None of the narratives expressed a high level of identification with entrepreneurship, yet their actions demonstrated considerable entrepreneurial activity, which was directed towards and used to benefit the clients. Self-employment had different meanings in the narratives, and it was used mainly instrumentally to build career and professional identity. Obviously, the prevailing narratives on what entrepreneurship is and who is considered an entrepreneur direct our sense-making regarding our entrepreneurial selves. Entrepreneurial activities, or entrepreneuring, do not yet make one an entrepreneur by identity.

## 7 Discussion and conclusions

### 7.1 Discussion

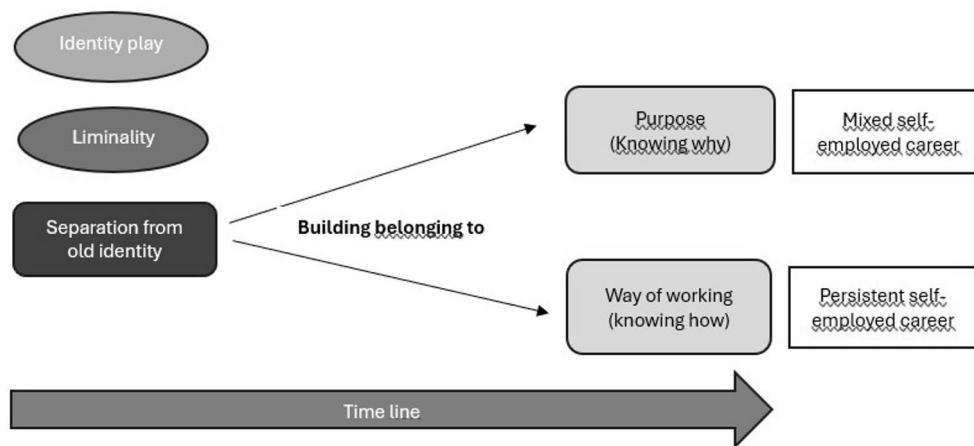
This study was driven by the desire to gain a deeper understanding of the liminal and non-typical work arrangements of interim managers who work in between employed work and entrepreneurship. The study aimed to build understanding of how interim managers perceive and make sense of their positioning in-between employed work and entrepreneurship, as well as their careers and entrepreneurship within these contexts. The perspective was focused on building a professional identity in this type of liminal setting and explaining how this shapes their career choices. The research question was “How do the entrepreneur interim managers construct their careers and make sense of their identity in the liminal work-life between entrepreneurship and employed work?” This question was approached through the lens of modern career theories focusing on liminal and under-institutionalized experiences and positions, as well as from the perspective of identity building within these settings. Through a social constructionist and narrative approach, it was possible to examine the stories of the interim managers in a sensitive and detailed manner, drawing on how they build their understanding of their careers and identities. The research provides new insights and advances the research of new ways of working, particularly those on the boundary between employed work and entrepreneurship, as well as those in seemingly under-institutionalized liminal settings.

The narratives that are told shape the life choices and career choices that people make. These choices are elements of individuals’ personal narratives. Again, these personal narratives shape the stories and narratives being told in general, and each story affects the grand narrative. This is the case with non-typical ways of working and entrepreneurship. Additionally, other grand narratives of our time shape the grand narrative of entrepreneurship. As Brattström and Wennberg (2022) write, the narrative of entrepreneurship as emancipation, in which entrepreneurship is viewed as a means for individual self-realization and self-sufficiency, reflects the grand narrative of individualism prevalent in Western societies of our time. Entrepreneurship has also been considered a tool for enhancing well-being (see e.g. Carter et al., 2003; Rindova et al., 2009; Wiklund et al., 2019), which can also be viewed as a reflection of individualism and the pursuit of fulfilling individual needs

and desires. However, as this study indicates, individual needs and desires may not serve the needs for building a coherent identity in a liminal work-life. That said, focusing on individual well-being and individualistic aims can be a necessary phase in life and careers, especially in situations of significant change. Simultaneously, it is obvious that individual-centered motivations always play some role in work life.

The modern career, whether described as boundaryless, protean, or something else, tells a similar story: Careers are becoming increasingly individualized. Individuals make career decisions based on their individual needs, values, and goals; the organizations they work for can change rapidly, and how work is executed becomes increasingly diversified. Long and stable careers within the same organizations are becoming less common, and work-related commitment has shifted in focus. This model of the modern career can profoundly influence the perspectives people have on how they draw their boundaries and define themselves and their work. It is not so much about the inexistence of boundaries, but rather about redrawing the boundaries from the perspective of individual needs. The liminal career that Budtz-Jorgensen et al. (2019) introduced suggested that a career becomes liminal when the normal career within an organization becomes “*betwixt and in between*”. The liminal career is characterized by a lack of clear categories, trajectories, and schemes to structure a career path. However, this does not occur only within a career within an organization but can occur between organizations and ways of working. A liminal state is characterized by the absence of clear social markers that individuals can use to define themselves (Budz-Jorgensen et al., 2019). This is when boundaries become highly relevant. Boundaries are necessary for identity construction because identities heavily rely on belonging to social groups. Human thinking and sense-making build on categorization; without boundaries, or, in cases of blurred boundaries, categorizing and building identity become more difficult if the social groups to which one belongs are unclear.

This study presents six stories and three narratives of interim managers and their careers in non-typical work, which falls between employed work and entrepreneurship. This study builds an understanding of how individuals make sense of their careers and identity development in these under-institutionalized work arrangements, where no clear role models exist. Figure 2 illustrates how identity building in under-institutionalized roles involves the phase of separation from the old, which simultaneously represents a state of liminality and a phase of identity play. A phase of building belonging to something new follows the phase of separation. In this study, this something was a purpose or way of working. When one can build a sense of belonging to something new, a stable identity can also be built. This foundation upon which one’s identity is built affects the self-employed career type of the individual and satisfaction towards this career type.

**Figure 2.** Identity building in under-institutionalized roles and its relation to career type.

The narrative of *The Liminalars* presents a narrative of career and identity building within the career, where one's previous role as an employed director had been an exhausting hamster wheel in which boundaries between work and free time had vanished, and the overall responsibility over the work and its demands spilled over into nights, weekends, and holidays. The workload had been exhausting. Leaving the employed directors' work and starting entrepreneurship had been a form of salvation – a way out. Entrepreneurship and work as an interim manager were liberating and full of possibilities, yet at the same time insecure and risky, expressing the liminal state of varying emotions from enthusiasm to anxiety. For the Liminalars, the timespan was short, as they had just begun as entrepreneurs with no clear view of the future. Focusing on the present moment and not dwelling too much on the future was possible. The focus was greatly on one's well-being, regaining control over one's life, and redefining boundaries. The Liminalars' expression of identity was highly focused on "Who am I not?" The Liminalars were in a phase of separation, as they had strongly distanced themselves from the employed director's identity. However, there was no clear counterpart upon which to build belonging and a new identity. The Liminalars kept all doors open for the future. They were in a phase of identity play between different possible identities and delayed commitment (Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010).

The narrative of *The Professional Interim Managers* tells a narrative about professionals who built a solid professional identity based on their way of working as interim managers. The timespan in this narrative was long, as an interim manager's work as an entrepreneur had been ongoing for long already, and the commitment to this way of working was solid. Continuing to work this way was strongly expressed; no other way of working was an option. No emotions attached

to liminality were expressed, even though, objectively viewed, their positioning might have seemed liminal. The Professional Interim Manager's narrative builds identity by separating from the identity of an employed director, as well as by establishing a sense of belonging within the way of working. They had developed a mental playbook for the way of working as an interim manager. There was a strong knowing-how the work was performed and knowing-why this was the way of working for them. There was no expression of boundaries being vague, but for The Professional Interim Managers, the boundaries had shifted and rooted to a new mode through time, repetition, commitment, and perseverance, enabling them to create the model for their way of working, despite no pre-set models, roles, and guidance for what being an interim manager entailed. Redrawing the boundaries enabled attachment and building a sense of belonging to something new.

The narrative of *The Purpose-Driven Shuttlers* tells a narrative of professionals who built identity upon a grand purpose – the driving force behind career decisions. There was no strong expression of “Who am I not?” since separating from something was of little significance in the narrative. Liminal emotions were not expressed, and the identity of the Purpose-Driven Shuttlers seemed solid and built upon a mission to drive a grand purpose. The work arrangement, whether employed work, entrepreneurship, interim management, or consulting, was irrelevant; the driver was the purpose of why the work was done. Developing companies and improving society was the will. The timespan of the Purpose-Driven Shuttlers was lengthy, and entrepreneurship played no significant role in identity building or careers. The Purpose-Driven Shuttlers built identity strongly on the knowing-why the work was done. They were not bound to a specific way of working, and the mode of work could be adjusted according to what best suited the situation. This made it possible to use liminality and the shuttling way of working between different types of work as an asset, enabling to work in any manner that suited the current situation best and fulfill the purpose.

All the narratives lack *communitas* and clear role models, and the absence of these communities to which to attach makes identity building more difficult (Petriglieri et al., 2019). Interim manager work carried out through one's own company is still a rather unknown way of working and lacks the explicitness, familiarity, and institutionalization that more institutionalized ways of working have. The lack of these leads to a lack of stability and predictable futures, which are needed to build a stable work identity. This study reveals that the work and role of an independent interim manager remain under-institutionalized; therefore, identity building becomes more challenging.

Building an identity requires not only asking the question, “Who am I?” but also “Who am I not?” Seemingly, the more the narratives talked about “Who am I?”, the more salient their expression of their selves and their identities and ways of working

were. When the expression was mostly centered around “Who am I not?” as was the case in the narrative of The Liminals, this seemed insufficient for building a coherent identity. This suggests that in under-institutionalized liminal settings within modern ways of working, answering the question of “Who am I?” is necessary, rather than just “Who am I not?”. Separation from old or from something else is crucial in building identity, as well as a need to differentiate oneself from others. Separation is a necessary yet insufficient condition for a solid identity to be established.

These narratives suggest that boundaries are socially constructed and subjective – even the boundaries between different ways of working. Boundaries and the definition and understanding of them are not positivistic, real-life constructions; rather, they occur differently for different individuals, and in the same sense, they can be changed, shifted, blurred, and rebuilt. Boundaries can be self-created; these narratives demonstrate that through time, repetition, commitment, systematic activity, and perseverance, boundaries can be redrawn, enabling attachment and belonging to the new.

Self-employed careers come in many forms; even for interim managers, there can be many different types of careers that can involve interim management. In this research, two distinct self-employed careers were mapped, following the work of Koch et al. (2021): The Purpose-Driven Shuttlers, representing the mixed self-employed career, and The Professional Interim Managers, exemplifying the persistent self-employed career. In the case of The Liminals, what their self-employed career would become, remain undefined. In Koch et al.’s (2021) study, the mixed self-employed were typically less satisfied with their way of working, but in the case of The Purpose-Driven Shuttlers, the satisfaction regarding the career and way of working was expressed. However, an important differentiating factor compared to Koch et al.’s (2021) study was that this type of mixed self-employed career was typically associated with low-wage and peripheral work, whereas The Purpose-Driven Shuttlers were privileged, highly educated, and very experienced professionals. For The Purpose-Driven Shuttlers, the mixed self-employed career was the tool and asset that helped them carry out their purpose – their *knowing-why*. Enabling work in many different forms, they were not excluded from any possibility due to the status and manner of work that would serve the execution of their purpose. This is also a reflection that forming a professional identity affects satisfaction towards the chosen career type. If the self-employed career type enables the fulfilment of working according to professional identity, satisfaction towards the way of working can be high. We cannot examine different self-employed careers solely from the outside if we truly want to understand them; we must connect the types of careers with one’s identity and motivational factors.

This all results in what we need to understand about new, under-institutionalized ways of working: According to Ibarra and Obodaru (2016), under-institutionalized

roles (e.g. entrepreneur interim managers) can lead to their institutionalization if more individuals respond similarly. These can then, over time, become the new institutionalized narratives to which individuals can build their identities and career-related decisions. This is particularly important in the world of increasingly individual and boundaryless careers, where there is a deep need for new role models to navigate the boundaries between employed work and entrepreneurship. We need to stop repeating the old narratives about employed work and entrepreneurship and find new narratives that help these new ways of working become institutionalized.

Returning to entrepreneurship and how we tend to consider who qualifies as an entrepreneur, the narratives offer an interesting new perspective on the subject. No strong identification with entrepreneurship was expressed in the narratives. However, high levels of entrepreneurial activity were expressed, which was not directed towards the interim manager's own company but towards and for the benefit of the client companies. In the narratives, there was no strong expression relating to being an entrepreneur, and real entrepreneurship was found to be something else than what they were doing. Entrepreneurship serves different meanings, but in all the narratives, entrepreneurship, or self-employment, was instrumental, a way to perform the type of work one wanted to do at that point in their careers. The narratives reinforced the idea that entrepreneurship can serve many different meanings and purposes in a multitude of ways: as *an activity, a status, and an identity*. In these narratives, there was a strong reflection on the question of "What am I doing?", which reflected the strong entrepreneurial approach in their client companies, for the benefit of these companies. All energy and effort were devoted to benefiting the client companies, and only planning was left for the interim manager's own businesses. Many thoughts and ideas circulated about building a real business, but as Ramoglou et al. (2020) noted, these "opportunities" were merely ideas that remained nonexistent until action was taken. Identity, "Who am I?", was built on factors other than entrepreneurship, and self-employment, or entrepreneurship as a work status, served as a platform or tool through which one could do the type of work one wanted.

Identity building in between entrepreneurship and employed work can be closely tied to factors beyond the status of being an entrepreneur, even when engaging in strong entrepreneurial activity. Self-employment as a way of working can serve as a means of doing the type of work one wants. Even in under-institutionalized and liminal roles, such as that of an interim manager, a solid identity can be built over time, through repetition and commitment. If more individuals identify and respond similarly to what it entails to be an interim manager, the under-institutionalized role can become institutionalized.

All the narratives in this study are only true in the moment they are told. As Savickas (2013) put it, individuals select and organize experiences and events for the

purpose of building a coherent story of their careers that makes sense to them. This selection and organizing is not made only once but happens continually. The upcoming events and experiences shape how we make sense of past experiences and events. The story is ever-changing. The meanings of past events change over time, thus continually reforming our identities. Identity work, especially in a professional context, happens through the sense-making process of career construction in which one derives meaning from their work experiences through the construction, deconstruction, reconstruction, and co-construction of life stories (Rudolph et al., 2019). This sense-making is the building block for identity work. Identity building requires attachment, and attachment requires boundaries. Attaching to something ambiguous, blurry, and boundaryless becomes difficult. If these boundaries cannot be found from the stories of our society, with perseverance, repetition, and commitment, one can create new boundaries to which to attach, as the narratives of The Professional Interim Managers and The Purpose-Driven Shuttlers have shown. These new boundaries then form important frames to which the life stories and career construction are attached. If the formally institutionalized boundaries in society do not align well with the boundaries we have built within ourselves, to form coherent stories and identities for ourselves, we might face a conflict between them. However, society is constantly evolving, and discourse plays a significant role in how these boundaries are deconstructed and reconstructed.

## 7.2 Contributions of the study

### 7.2.1 Theoretical contributions

This research provides a new understanding and takes forward the research on new ways of working, work on the boundary between employed work and entrepreneurship, and work in under-institutionalized liminal settings. This research builds understanding of the careers and identity building of self-employed interim managers in atypical work arrangements in between employed work and entrepreneurship. According to Tracy (2010), a *significant contribution* is one of the assessment tools used to evaluate the study's "goodness". The contribution of this research lies strongly in the study of a fresh, relatively new, and under-institutionalized phenomenon of interim management. The approach of this research is largely data-driven, and the aim was to study what the collected data tells us. The data provided subjective narratives about the sense-making processes of individuals in these liminal settings. These narratives provide a new understanding of theories of identity and under-institutionalized liminal states. This study also contributes to practice and gives suggestions for policymakers. The research provides a new understanding and takes forward the research on new ways of working, work on the

boundary between employed work and entrepreneurship, and work in seemingly under-institutionalized liminal settings. This study contributes to theories on boundaryless careers, the intelligent career, self-employed career patterns, and theories on entrepreneuring and entrepreneurial identity building.

Most studies on nontraditional ways of working and self-employment focus on precarious settings in which the self-employed are insecure and trapped in exploitative situations in their work. Self-employment and atypical work arrangements of highly educated and experienced professionals have been studied less. Although the work for both groups might be, in some sense, project-type and insecure, significant differences also exist. The interim managers of this study did not need to worry much about their future work since they were individuals who were asked to do different work without having to do much sales work or “find” the work. Many doors were open to them, allowing them to choose their work. This research provides new knowledge and understanding of the type of atypical, project-like, and, in this sense, precarious work that highly educated and experienced individuals perform. The research highlights the differences that must be considered when studying atypical work: The differences are not only one, but many, and the context makes a significant difference.

As we explored the narratives of the interim managers and the non-typical ways of working, the way of working and liminal experiences resembled what Ibarra and Obodaru (2016) describe as under-institutionalized liminal settings, which differ from the traditional view of liminality. The narratives made it apparent that an interim manager’s work as a self-employed entrepreneur was and remains a somewhat unknown and undefined way of working. It lacks clear role models and an institutionalized understanding of the way of working, which are essential for identity building. However, building a coherent identity is possible in this type of under-institutionalized work arrangement, although it requires more from the individual, and there is a risk of premature identity withdrawal (Ibarra & Obodaru, 2016). This study takes a closer look at individual’s identity building and career-related decision-making in under-institutionalized roles. Separation from the previous identity is a necessary, yet insufficient, condition for building a new identity. This research suggests that the experience of liminality is intensely present during this phase of separation before the individual can begin to build a sense of belonging to something new. This implies the experience of liminality can start to fade as individual begins to build a sense of belonging to something new. This something new that an individual can build belonging to and identity around can have different objects. In this study, identity in under-institutionalized settings was built into the way of working and to a purpose. This research contributes new insights into existing literature on identity building in under-institutionalized roles by shifting the context to highly experienced professionals, as opposed to the typical precarious

workers (see Petriglieri et al., 2019). An in-depth perspective on identity building when only limited role models are available helps us look closer to the sense-making of an individual and how they construct what the theory on intelligent career (See Arthur et al., 1995) calls as *knowing-why and knowing-how*. This research suggests that individual's personal purpose can serve as a foundation for identity building and, through this, shape career behaviour and facilitate career-related decision-making when one has a strong understanding of their personal *knowing-why*. In a similar sense, the research builds a deep understanding of the process of how one can build identity in relation to the *knowing-how* (i.e. the way of working) (See Arthur et al., 1995; Arthur, 2004).

This research provides a new theoretical understanding of self-employed career patterns (See Koch et al., 2021) by indicating that a mixed self-employed career can be a satisfying and purposeful career type if the individual has a strong attachment to their *knowing-why* (i.e. their purpose). When one's purpose is strong and provides the framework for career-related decision-making, mixed self-employment can serve this purpose best; it allows the individual to be whatever is needed for the realization of their purpose. They can change their position and way of working to best serve the needs of the organization they are working for. The profile of an individual's identity can influence how a self-employed career pattern meets their needs and aspirations, which affects their work satisfaction. The study also showed that the self-employed career type of persistent self-employment (See Koch et al., 2021) can be a satisfying career for highly educated and experienced self-employed individuals. This research highlights that individual motivations have significance over the satisfaction towards the self-employed career type. If one's motivations align well with the chosen way of working, the self-employed career type – whether mixed, persistent, or something else – can become an asset in realizing individual needs, values, and aspirations, which play a significant role in the boundaryless and protean career (See e.g. Briscoe et al., 2006). This study highlights the importance of appreciating the diverse career types that involve self-employment and making these career types valued and appreciated in our society. In search of social belonging, which is essential for individuals, it is crucial that the chosen career path is valued in society and that the individual takes pride in their livelihood.

This research explores entrepreneurship by examining the concept of identity, making several contributions to the field of entrepreneurship. First, this research facilitates an understanding of how self-employed entrepreneurs build understanding on their identities as self-employed interim managers. Entrepreneurial identity can be a psychological resource that helps entrepreneurs meet their needs for belonging, self-enhancement, and positive distinctiveness (Stepherd & Haynie, 2009). However, even for the self-employed, this distinctiveness need not be built solely on entrepreneurship; it can also be built upon the way of working or purpose. This study

shows us that distinctiveness can also occur independently, without a clear counterpart.

Obviously, the general narratives on entrepreneurship shape how interim managers view their entrepreneurship. This research was focused on identity building; to understand this more precisely, we needed to look at entrepreneurship through distinct perspectives: Entrepreneurship as an activity or as a verb that answers the question, “What am I doing?” and entrepreneurship as a noun, status, or identity that answers the question, “Who am I?” This research suggests that entrepreneurial identity is not a necessary prerequisite for acting entrepreneurially. This study’s narratives reflect Johannison’s (2011) concept about entrepreneurship as practice: *it is about getting things done*. This study suggests that someone working as an entrepreneur can act entrepreneurially, even if the entrepreneurial activities are not directed towards the individual’s own business, and the individual not identifying as entrepreneur. Entrepreneurial activities can also be directed towards someone else’s business, even in this setting. This research provides valuable new insights into the dual aspects of entrepreneurship as a status and an identity, as well as a verb and an activity. The interim managers put all their energy, effort, and action into the work in their interim assignments. Their entrepreneurial activity was put into action *for* the client company’s benefit; for their own business plans, they had only visions and planning. Entrepreneurship, or self-employment as a form of work, served mainly instrumental purposes, enabling one to perform the type of work one wanted to do.

### 7.2.2 Practical contributions

This research operates at the interface between employed work and entrepreneurship in seeking to better understand new ways of working. As we continually develop new ways and methods for acquiring needed competencies and resources for organizations use, this research provides important new practical insights from the individual perspective for managerial needs, career counselling, and at the societal level.

1. *Managerial needs*. For the managerial needs of organizations, this study has provided important new insights into the use of interim management services and how interim managers perceive their position and work within the client companies. It is fair to say that this study highlights the high morale and value thinking that the interim managers bring to their interim assignments. They give their best for the client company, and as this study shows, none of the participants took the work less seriously, even if the work tasks were not the most motivating or if they were over-competent for the role. Everyone gave 100% of their energy, expertise, and entrepreneurial way of working

for the client company's benefit. The most experienced interim managers had developed a systematic framework for their work, enabling them to choose and agree on assignments in ways that mutually benefited them and the company. This study suggests that using interim management is a solution for organizations, bringing high value.

2. *Career counselling and professional communities.* This study greatly focused on the experiences and sense-making of interim managers regarding their careers and choices that they make in this liminal and under-institutionalized setting in between employed work and entrepreneurship. This study highlights the need for role models in these new ways of working since role models and examples can enhance the construction of identity for this new way of working. Another clear need this study reveals is the need for peer support and a professional community, which were lacking in the stories and are crucial to the identity process, particularly in this type of liminal situation. Start-up programs and mentoring programs for entrepreneurs exist, but there is limited support for newly begun self-employed entrepreneurs. This type of communal activity and peer support could benefit the sense-making of their work arrangement. Such an approach could enable them to build a community and a holding environment for their way of working (Petriglieri et al., 2019). Peer support could enhance learning from one another about what this type of work entails, which might strengthen the individuals' self-esteem and identity building as interim managers. Hennekam et al.'s (2021) study on French interim managers and their career communities revealed the importance of communities in sustaining a sustainable career as interim managers. This finding suggests that professional communities may facilitate individuals' identity building and help them remain on their chosen path, lowering the risk of premature withdrawal from the emerging identity-building process in a liminal state, especially for newly begun interim managers. These types of professional communities would not only benefit self-employed interim managers, but a similar support system might also benefit other self-employed professionals. This study also demonstrates that through repetition and activity, building a coherent identity and establishing oneself as a self-employed interim manager is possible. Similarly, maintaining a career in which one can transition between different statuses and ways of working when there is a purpose – a mission that drives the activity – is also possible. However, for individuals, this road might be easier if peer support and communities were available to facilitate this work.

3. *Societal level.* On a societal level, this research offers a new understanding of new ways of working on the borderline between employed work and entrepreneurship. Our social narratives about entrepreneurship are limited and perhaps do not answer to what modern-day entrepreneurship entails. We must create and maintain a more nuanced and diverse portfolio of what entrepreneurship comprises and the possibilities it can provide an individual. This gap between the grand narratives of entrepreneurship and the real-life, fascinating versatility of everyday entrepreneurship can be narrowed through telling stories about different ways of entrepreneurship. The media and the academic community play an important role in this. In academia, we must purposefully and actively build imagery on the multiplicity of ways of entrepreneuring and being an entrepreneur so that we open views of multiple possibilities rather than close them. Entrepreneurship presents numerous opportunities and possibilities for individuals, communities, and societies; thus, all forms of entrepreneurship must be supported.

### 7.3 Limitations and future research

This study has focused on the sense-making of identities and careers in the liminal work-life between employed work and entrepreneurship. New ways of working that have been emerging for at least a decade have many similarities with our institutionalized ways of working but they are also profoundly different in some ways. In our society where cultural discourse creates categorizations and boundaries on social phenomenon, some constructions can be defined as institutional, for example employment or entrepreneurship. These institutionalized roles hold certain features that are commonly shared and understood between individuals and therefore identification with these roles is relatively easy. However, as we have seen in this research, new ways of working can lack role models and remain under-institutionalized, meaning that these ways of working are not understood similarly between individuals and there is not a consensus or common understanding of the features of these roles. This ambiguity makes it difficult for individuals to attach to and build identity on. However, a coherent identity can be built on these new ways of working but it requires more time, and the phase of liminality cannot be rushed. When more people act upon these under-institutionalized roles, in time, the roles can become institutionalized.

As a limitation I find that comparing the different narratives is on some level problematic since the time span was so different. In the narratives of *The Professional Interim Managers* and *The Purpose-Driven Shuttlers*, the objective liminality had become permanent and was no longer subjectively liminal. This must be considered a limitation to the comparability of the different narratives. The

Liminals were experiencing the liminal phase as the other narratives had gone through this phase a long time ago and even though this was approached retrospectively, it is never the same as when the phase is going on. When comparing the different narratives to one another, this has been a matter to closely keep in mind. Since this study had a limited number of participants out of which the narratives were drawn, comparing the different narratives needed to be done carefully evaluating what is comparable in the narratives.

The research approach was designed in a way that the study explored a relatively new phenomenon to bring visible new elements and sub-phenomena about the phenomenon. However, as the focus of the participants was very much on the work setting, this might have affected some important matters related to personal life events were not brought up. This is an aspect that is typical for narrative research. In careful reflections on my own positive attitudes towards the studied phenomenon, it is possible that the difficult, negative and critical aspects have unintentionally not been addressed sufficiently in the interviews. The narratives described in this study are not the entire truth, but they are examples that emerged from the setting of this study, and they explain something new regarding identity, career and working in liminal and under-institutionalized settings.

Another limitation to address is the timespan of the study. The aim of the data collection was not so much in trying to capture the process but to gain a deeper understanding of the selected themes and stories that the participants told. The method was mainly selected to be able to return to the themes that needed deepening. A longitudinal approach, spanning a longer period of interviews and different phases of a career, would have provided even greater understanding of the identity-building process. From a rather short period of time and retrospective point-of-view of the interviews, the process is only limited, and this is a limitation that needs to be understood within this study.

The outcomes of this research on the phases of identity building in under-institutionalized settings could be transferred to other contexts as well. This study focused on entrepreneur interim managers, but similarly, the identity building of other groups of entrepreneurs and independent workers could also be understood through this study's findings. Particularly, the connections between experiencing liminality and the phase of separation from one's old identity imply that this also holds in other settings. However, the studied group in this research was, in many ways, incomparable to other groups of independent workers because of their privileged position. The interim managers in this study were in positions with many opportunities and plenty of social capital. This is an important limitation to notice when considering the transferability of this study to other contexts. Other, less privileged groups of the self-employed are in very different positions regarding their options and possibilities.

An important outcome of this study is the understanding of how identity can be built in different aspects of under-institutionalized roles; in this study, these aspects were the way of working and purpose. This outcome suggests that this might also apply to other settings and even to those with more institutionalized roles. This study provides a new understanding of self-employed career patterns, suggesting that one's motivations and identity influence the satisfaction experienced in their chosen career type. This study also indicates that one's entrepreneurial activities do not necessarily associate with entrepreneurial identity. This interesting finding can also be transferred to other settings.

This study focused on entrepreneur interim managers, but the connections between experienced liminality and the phase of separation from old identity should be studied in other contexts as well. This study suggests that at least in under-institutionalized role's identity can be built to different foci which in this study were way of working and purpose. It seems inevitable that there are other foci of identity building as well in under-institutionalized roles which did not occur in this study. This is an interesting direction that could be studied further. This study these foci was the way of working and purpose. This outcome implies that this might apply as well to other settings and even to setting in more institutionalized roles. The study implies that the motivations and identity of the individual shape the experienced satisfaction in the chosen self-employed career type. Additional qualitative research on this would most likely provide new understanding on the phenomenon.

This study implied that a shuttling way of working in between employed work and entrepreneurship, a mixed self-employed career pattern can be an asset for the individual in achieving career related aspirations and enabling the individual to work according to one's personal values and enabled to fulfil personal career related goals. This narrative shows us that identity is not dependable on the way of working but the shuttling way of working can even be an important element of identity. Additional qualitative research could bring valuable new understanding on this. Finally, this study implicates that the entrepreneurial activities of the individual do not necessarily associate together with entrepreneurial identity. This is an interesting finding that can be transferred to other settings as well.

It is noteworthy that throughout this research, the theme of individualism has been a grand theme on the background and a major influence on the themes addressed in this study. This Western individualism as a grand theme and narrative might provide even deeper insights to career and identity theories. This is a theme that I would encourage to be studied further.

It would also be interesting to study interim managers for a longer period longitudinally, for example for a few years. The research design of this study and the fact that the time span in this research is short sets a limitation to the study. It could be beneficial to follow longer the newly begun entrepreneurs to gain longer and

deeper understanding about how their activities and their commitment to their way of working progress.

Finally, one suggestion for future research is the way communities and peer groups can shape individuals' belonging to their way of working. In this research, none of the narratives described much about any professional communities, such as interim manager career communities. Instead, some of them were pondering if they would be missing the communality of an organization or some other community. Perhaps we indeed lack this type of career communities and support groups for the self-employed who work outside established organizations.

This research provides new knowledge in a versatile way to the phenomenon of working in-between employed work and entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurial activity and entrepreneurial identity are not straight forward phenomena, but they are complex and much intertwined to the context in which they take place. The self-employed working in-between entrepreneurship and employed work are a diverse group who cannot be viewed as one group, but it is a group of multiplicity of different experiences on their entrepreneurship.

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# Appendices

## Appendix 1. Interview questions and themes.

### First Interview

#### 1. Background Information

- Could you please tell about yourself, your previous work history, and your education
- How did you become an entrepreneur?
- Tell about your current job description as an entrepreneur
- What thoughts and feelings does being an entrepreneur and entrepreneurship evoke in you?

#### 2. Carrying Out Interim Manager Assignments

- How did you end up doing interim manager assignments?
- Why do you want to do interim manager assignments?
- How can you personally influence the types of assignments you accept?
- In your own words, could you describe the interim manager assignments you have done?
- Could you tell me about goal setting in interim manager assignments?

#### 3. Commitment and Motivation

- What is important to you right now in your work and career?
- What things inspire you in your work?
- What things cause friction or are unpleasant?
- What kind of goals do you want to promote in your career?
- What values do you have regarding work, which are important to you, and which ones do you want to adhere to?
- What in your career and work right now would you like to hold on to? And what could you let go?
- Could you share what makes you do your best in interim manager assignments?
- Could you tell about assignments where you have felt particularly strong commitment?
- And could you tell about assignments where your commitment has been weaker?
- How do you feel that entrepreneurship and interim manager assignments can be combined?

#### **4. Future Plans**

- What kind of future plans do you have for your career?
- What kind of thoughts and goals do you possibly have regarding interim manager assignments in the future?

#### **5. New Assignment**

- You have just started a new interim manager assignment. Could you tell me about the assignment?
- Could you tell about the negotiation phase of the assignment and your options in that situation?
- How are you currently feeling about the assignment?
- What expectations do you have regarding the assignment?
- Could you describe how you feel your own skills and experience fit this assignment?
- Could you talk about what motivates you in this assignment? And do you currently feel any uncertainties regarding this assignment?

#### **Follow-Up Interviews**

- Could you tell about the start of the assignment
- How would you describe the organization and its culture?
- How do you perceive your position in the organization? How do you feel your team and other people in the organization relate to you?
- How would you describe your trust towards the organization and its people?
- How has the assignment met your expectations?
- Could you share what kind of things motivate you in the assignment?
- How do you feel the fixed term of the assignment affects your work?
- In your opinion, how is it reflected in your work that you are an interim manager and not a hired executive in the company?
- How do you feel you have succeeded in the assignment so far?
- Could you share what thoughts and feelings the company's values, vision, and goals evoke in you?
- And what thoughts do the company's operating methods and practices evoke?
- What would you think if you were asked to extend the assignment or were offered a permanent position in the company?
- How are you currently advancing your own business activities?

#### **Final Interview**

- How does it feel that the assignment is ending soon?
- What thoughts does the assignment bring up now as it is nearing its end?
- When you think about the expectations you had for the assignment and compare them to your actual experience, can you say in which ways your expectations were met and in which ways reality was different?
- Would you hope to do assignments in this organization again in the future?
- Do you already know what you are going to do after the assignment ends





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