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Master Degree Project in Innovation and Industrial Management

The challenge of supporting employees to come as they are

- A case study of being yourself at work within the management consulting industry

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Abstract

Previous research show that although it is desirable and valuable for both the company and the individual to be yourself at work as an employee, it is rarely the reality today. Statistics (Smith & Yoshino, 2013) show that it is tough to be yourself at work today, especially in the fast paced management consultancy industry where expectations are high. Valcon, a Danish firm operating in the management consultancy industry, is trying to figure out how to manage this challenge. The purpose of this paper is to give Valcon guidance in this work by getting an increased understanding of how Valcon can support employees' ability of being themselves at work. This was investigated through a qualitative research where semi-structured interviews were performed with employees at Valcon. Three main findings are being presented. The first finding suggests that identity, expressions and relations are defining the concept of being yourself at work at Valcon. The second finding consists of four different factors that influence the ability of being yourself at work; consulting, individuality, workplace and structures. The third finding reveals the organisational actions being connected to managing the four influencing factors. The conclusion for Valcon, in order for them to support their employees to be themselves at work, is that the concept is subjective and complex but that there is a need to look at the different aspects of the definition and perform organisational actions related to all four groups of factors.

Keywords

Being yourself at work, Holacracy, Identity, Management Consulting Industry, Wholeness

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1. Introduction

This chapter consists of a description of the background and problem discussion of the topic. This leads on to the research purpose and the research question. Lastly, a description of the delimitations of the study is presented along with the disposition.

1.1. Background

*"Employees who believe that management is concerned about them as a whole person - not just an employee - are more productive, more satisfied, more fulfilled. Satisfied employees mean satisfied customers, which leads to profitability." - A statement from Anne M. Mulcahy¹ that few management teams today would question. At the same time, however, there is still a battle to find the 'perfect employee' who should "be available 24/7, never tire (mentally or physically), show no emotions besides enthusiasm for the tasks at hand, blend in seamlessly with current employees, have no outside responsibilities, and always put the job first. Will gladly and easily leave quirks and personal needs at home and set aside any responsibilities that may interfere with their duties."². This is an equation which does not add up, something which has led companies and business leaders paying more attention to the employees. As employees are actually found to perform better when they feel personally connected and interested at work (Sheldon & Elliot, 1999), this should also be of interest in the organisation. By enabling and supporting employees to be themselves to a higher extent, more of their attention can be directed at work performance, rather than hiding or downplaying parts of who they are. This could result in major performance gains and thereby increased revenues, something which should be of interest to managers (Sheldon & Elliot, 1999). With regards to the benefits organisations could reap from focusing on the whole employee, it is alarming that the report *Uncovering Talent: A New Model of Inclusion* recently revealed that 61% of all employees cover their identity in some way (Smith & Yoshino, 2013). How should organisations tackle these challenges and create a place where employees feel free to be themselves and come as they are?*

One company being particularly interested in this question is Valcon Consulting AS. The Danish company operates within the management consulting industry, an industry which has historically been characterised by hard values, such as the up-or-out policy and elite identities (Kipping & Clark, 2012). This nature of the industry makes it especially challenging to employ many of the practices which could be of high relevance for attracting, retaining and exploit the right talents. In addition to being an industry with great need for intellectual capital, it is also an industry where the idea of being yourself at work is challenging traditional industry practices (Kipping & Clark, 2012). As a result, Valcon recently made the bold statement of launching the goal to become the happiest company in the world (Fischer, 2018), which is an indicator of the fact that they value and give attention to softer values and will actively be working with questions related to being yourself at work.

¹ <https://www.businesswire.com/news/home/20030516005369/en/LifeCare-Conference-Features-Xerox-CEO-Anne-Mulcahy>

² <https://consciouscompanymedia.com/workplace-culture/pays-help-employees-authentic/>

1.2. Problem Definition

Despite the strong relevance for management in today's organisations, research within this field is still lagging behind. Although several studies discuss the idea of being yourself at work, researchers are using different names of the same concept and have neither yet agreed upon a definition of the phenomenon nor defined what this really means in a practical context. There is, in other words, a gap in research when it comes to understanding the concept.

Another gap in the literature concerns the level on which the phenomenon is studied. There is an extensive body of research studying the feeling of being yourself on an individual level, for example in terms of different explanations of what it means for the individual. However, there is a gap in research when it comes to the organisational level, i.e. what organisations can do to support the employees' feeling and comfort in being themselves at work, which needs to be filled.

As of today, there is limited research of the phenomenon within the management consulting industry. Some researchers have, for example, problematized the conflicting identities consultants experience (Muhr & Kirkegaard, 2011; Mühlhaus & Bouwmeester, 2016) but most literature are, however, problem-focused rather than focused on how organisations should manage these challenges. Furthermore, the majority of the research is focused on the organisational identities consultants take on (Costas & Flemming, 2009; Kärreman & Alvesson, 2009), and not how the private-self is hidden. Therefore, it would be relevant to study the concept within a management consulting perspective. There is a need to look at how the specific characteristics of this industry impact what it means to be yourself at work and how organisations should navigate in this.

1.3. Purpose

With regards to the background and problem discussion, the purpose of this research is to gain an increased understanding of how Valcon can support employees' ability of being themselves at work. This is done by looking at how the phenomenon could be defined, what the influencing factors are as well as what actions organisations can undertake to manage these factors.

The academic contribution for this study is twofold. Firstly, it contributes by creating an increased understanding of what the phenomenon means, thereby laying a foundation for a common understanding of the topic. Secondly, this study also contributes by strengthening the body of research of the phenomenon within the management consulting context.

In terms of practical contribution, this research provides Valcon with an increased understanding of what they can do to support their employees' ability of being themselves at work which will hopefully guide them in reaching their aspiration of becoming the happiest company in the world. Specifically, this research will increase their understanding of what the concept means for their employees, what the influencing factors are, and what they can do to manage these factors. Hopefully, other companies, both within and outside the management consulting industry, will also find this research useful for understanding the managerial implications of this topic.

1.4. Research Question

With regards to the background, problem discussion and purpose of this study, the research question has been formulated as following:

What can Valcon do to support the employees' ability to be themselves at work?

In order to facilitate the study, the research question has been broken down into the following three sub-questions:

1. What does 'being yourself at work' mean for the employees?
2. What factors affect the employees' ability to be themselves at work?
3. How should the factors affecting the employees' ability to be themselves at work be managed?

1.5. Delimitations

In order to focus the research, four delimitations have been made. Firstly, as this research is focused on what Valcon can do as an organisation, there will be no focus on what individuals can do to increase the ability and feeling of being themselves at work. Secondly, even though the diversity of the respondents in the study will make it possible to make a comparison among different respondents, a decision has been taken to keep the study on a general level in order to prioritise the confidentiality of the respondents. This delimitation is also in line with the exploratory focus of this research. Thirdly, the focus will be on Valcon as a whole organisation, rather than a comparison between their different offices. Fourthly, since the aim of this research is to capture the current status and future actions, the previous development of Valcon as well as the company's history is beyond the scope of this research and will not be covered.

1.6. Disposition

This thesis consists of six different parts, following the order specified below.

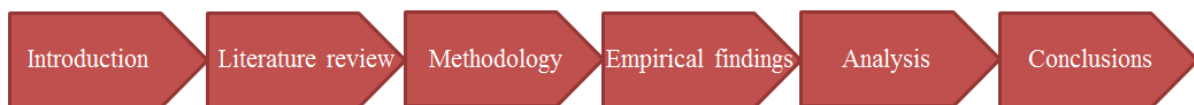


Figure 1: Disposition of the thesis

2. Literature Review

The following chapter presents the literature review. The chapter begins with an overview of the definition of the concept, both in a general sense and in a practical management consulting context, and is summarised with a table of related concepts. This is followed by one section about the factors affecting the ability to be yourself at work, and one section about the organisational actions which can facilitate and support employees to be themselves at work. The chapter ends with a concluding discussion of the three parts.

Most would agree that the interest in this topic started when the Neo-Human Relations School was introduced in the 1950's by Maslow (1943), Herzberg, Mausner and Snyderman (1959) and McGregor (1960). As a reaction to the scientific management, they emphasised the importance of the psychological needs of employees and put the individual in the centre for the first time in work-related contexts (Thompson & McHugh, 2002). Maslow (1943) identified what he called the hierarchy of needs, concluding five steps of human motivation. The fifth and final step, self-actualisation, have recently gotten renewed attention in the book *Reinventing Organizations* by Laloux (2014). Laloux (2014) explains how he perceives a new paradigm shift to be the next stage in the human evolution and it is all focused on increased individual awareness. The core message Laloux (2014) is emphasising is to bring all of who you are to work, and he is presenting this idea within the concept of wholeness. Despite the increased interest in the human factors of the employee, the concept of being yourself is still undefined among researchers. Many researchers and theorists mention authenticity as behaving congruently with one's true self, but what that really means remains unanswered. As will be shown in the literature review, researchers are disagreeing on how to conceptualise and measure authenticity, and whether being yourself or not. What they are agreeing on however, is the desirability to be yourself.

When it comes to the management consulting context, there are a limited number of studies. It is also argued to be a general problem with research related to management consulting, mainly because of the high level of confidentiality in the industry (Kipping & Clark, 2012). However, over the past decades, there has been an increased body of research within the field of 'being yourself at work'. In research, there has been an increased emphasis of the importance of people's everyday work for their understanding of themselves. There is a strong focus in the literature on the challenges towards being yourself at work, where the consulting identity is argued to have significant influence over self-definition (Alvesson & Robertson, 2006; Costas & Kärreman, 2016; Kipping & Clark, 2012; Muhr & Kirkegaard, 2013). For example, Costas and Kärreman (2016) have written about how unfilled aspirations of the consulting identity leads to a bored self while Humle and Pedersen (2010) have investigated the relationship between consultants' performance within their role and their self-definition. In contrary to this perspective, there are also researchers who argue that a focus on the consulting identity as a mean of separating the work-self and the private-self is beneficial, for example since it help consultants cope with work related stress (Mühlhaus & Bouwmeester, 2016) and can be used by management as a control mechanism (Alvesson &

Kärreman, 2004). Furthermore, there is also a growing body of research focusing on how to overcome the tension between the private-self and the work-self (Costas & Fleming, 2009).

2.1. Definition

When it comes to what it means to be yourself at work and how consultants define themselves, the topic is rather unexplored. The research in this field is very much focused on work identities and how there is little room for the private-self left at the workplace. Although there is not one specific definition to be found in the literature of being yourself at work, there are related concepts touching upon the subject which needs to be explored. These clearly relate to the topic of being yourself at work and will help map the existing knowledge base of today. The four concepts which will be further explained are authenticity, holacracy, identity and wholeness.

2.1.1. Authenticity

Some researchers are claiming that the ability to be yourself, everywhere, is depending on authenticity (Bostan, 2016; Kahn, 1990; Ménard & Brunet, 2011; Rich, LePine & Crawford, 2010; Sheldon & Elliot, 1999). Authenticity is a concept with strong links to the topic of being yourself. Turner (1976) for example, explains that his definition of authenticity is being able to show your real self. Maslow (1971) argues that in order to be authentic and show authenticity, your true identity needs to be discovered, before the behaviour can be aligned with your feelings and desires. Erickson (1995) agrees when explaining that authenticity is the behaviour where your true beliefs, attitudes and values are shown. Barrett-Lennard (1998) takes this further when claiming that the behaviour must also be free of expectations and influences from others.

Conceptualisation and operationalisation of authenticity is, however, unclear and inconsistent (Jongman-Sereno & Leary, 2018), which is why the body of literature is diffuse (Harter, Snyder & Lopez, 2002). This gives rise to the phenomenon of subjective authenticity, where people experience the feeling of being, and not being, themselves (Jongman-Sereno & Leary, 2018). This feeling of being authentic can actually be just as important as truly being authentic (Gan, Heller & Chen, 2018). As an example of this Bettencourt and Sheldon (2001) and Goldman and Kernis (2002), among others, have shown that self-rated authenticity is associated with well-being, while Gan, Heller and Chen (2018) have proven that the feeling of being authentic is positively correlated with the feeling of power. In other words, that people who experience or visualise themselves as being authentic felt more powerful.

2.1.2. Holacracy

Professional selves should not be narrowed down, and it is the responsibility of the organisations to enable the whole individual (Bernstein et. al., 2016). Back in the 1960s Koestler (1967) argued that each person's value at work is not decided based on the position in a hierarchy, but rather his or her uniqueness and individuality, as well as the ability to engage and interact with others to show and express the originality. This was a new way of thinking, and researchers took a lot of inspiration from this when presenting the idea of holacracy (Bernstein et al., 2016; Greenfield, 2015; Vijay & Subhasree, 2018). Holacracy is

continuing to evolve the thinking of Koestler (1967) and seeks to ultimately replace any conventional management hierarchy (Bernstein et al., 2016). Employees are given more freedom to make changes and the power is spread out within the organisation (Greenfield, 2015). Instead of a traditional hierarchy there are circles within circles, meaning that there are no traditional hierarchies but shifting responsibilities depending on tasks or projects which can overlap (Bernstein et al., 2016). Through this leaderless structure holacracy promotes individualisation and allows for increased responsiveness as well as immediacy in time and place (Vijay & Subhasree, 2018). Job titles are becoming obsolete and no longer deemed necessary; instead the employees take on multiple different roles within different contexts and situations at work (Greenfield, 2015).

2.1.3. Identity

The concept of identity has been developed in a number of ways in previous research. Ashforth and Mael (1989) view identity as the subjective interpretation of who you are, based on socio-demographic characteristics, personal attributes and roles of every individual. Alvesson, Lee Ashcraft and Thomas (2008) specify that identity loosely refers to the subjective meanings and experiences of an individual. Gecas (1982) adds that it gives structure and content to the concept of self and is anchoring the self to social systems. The social situation and the context for established identities are important, argues Gecas (1982), and claims that identities together with self-esteem are what create the self-concept. Costas and Kärreman (2016) agree when arguing that identity work is constrained by the social context. Collinson (2003) states that there is no such thing as a singular sense of self, and argues that multiple identities are being created for different aspects of our lives. Some are able to coexist, while others may be contradictory (Collinson, 2003).

2.1.4. Wholeness

As a part of Laloux's (2014) Teal paradigm, wholeness is focusing on every individual employee and their ability to be all of who they are at work. Laloux (2014) explains that there is a tradition of encouraging the creation of a professional self where strength and determination are desired qualities. Showing vulnerability and doubts on the other hand is discouraged. Being rational has often been preferred over being emotional or intuitive, claims Laloux (2014), meaning that this needs to change. These expectations create barriers for employees to be themselves at work; something that Laloux (2014) instead argues should be supported. The concept of wholeness is all about being and expressing yourself at work, and that is not an easy task. It requires employees to open up, not only in the happiest moments, but also in between, when they are not at their best. The emotional and intuitive part of people should be connected and shared. (Laloux, 2014)

Laloux (2014) argues that it is necessary for each individual to actively take responsibility for the experience of wholeness and not wait for the organisation to make it happen. Since the experience of wholeness is individual, Laloux (2014) argues that each individual should be aware of when they are experiencing wholeness and when they are not. It is also important to remember that wholeness is an ongoing process, and not an end state you can reach. That is

why maintenance and support is beneficial in order to continue and expanding the experience of wholeness. (Laloux, 2014)

Concepts	Definition	Source
Authenticity	The idea of being yourself, everywhere and at all times.	Bostan, 2016; Kahn, 1990; Ménard & Brunet, 2011; Rich, LePine & Crawford, 2010; Sheldon & Elliot, 1999
Holacracy	An organisational model where the value of a person is based on individuality and uniqueness, not hierarchies. Individual purpose is key.	Bernstein et al., 2016; Greenfield, 2015; Vijay & Subhasree, 2018
Identity	Belief, personality, looks, what makes a person a person. One person can have multiple identities for different aspects or situations in life.	Alvesson, Lee Ashcraft & Thomas, 2008; Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Collinson, 2003; Costas & Kärreman, 2016; Gecas, 1982
Wholeness	As one part of the organisational paradigm Teal, wholeness is about bringing the whole self to work.	Laloux, 2014

Table 1: Summary of the concepts

2.1.5. The management consulting context

Within the management consulting industry there are increasingly blurred boundaries between the self and the organisation (Kipping & Clark, 2012) and between the self and the work (Alvesson & Robertson, 2006), both mentally and in terms of time (Humble & Pedersen, 2010). However, according to Kipping and Clark (2012), research indicates that the blurring boundaries mostly have to do with the prioritisation of work identity and that little room is given to the private self. Kärreman and Alvesson (2009) agree on the emphasis on the work-self by stating that due to consultants subordinate themselves to work, they become ‘corporate selves’ with little autonomy and ability to let private needs govern their work. Even though some argue that the work identity is more important within management consulting than for other occupations (Alvesson & Robertson, 2006), some argue that the conflict between integrity and confirmation of one’s self is not too serious (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2004).

There is strong agreement within literature that consultants’ self-definitions are influenced by their profession (Alvesson & Robertson, 2006; Johnsen, Muhr & Pedersen, 2009; Kipping & Clark, 2012; Muhr & Kirkegaard, 2013; Mühlhaus & Bouwmeester, 2016). Consultants often define themselves as ‘professionals’, where the definition of the organisation and the

relationship to it plays an important role for their self-definition (Kipping & Clark, 2012). At the one hand, there are arguments for consultants referring to themselves and consultants as an in-group, while ‘normal office workers’ are referred to as an out-group. On the other hand, there are also arguments for employees at consulting firms identifying as consultants, rather than employees at a specific firm. (Mühlhaus & Bouwmeester, 2016) Furthermore, there are also researchers arguing that there is a construction of consultants as elite workers (Costas & Kärreman, 2016), that the elite identity is incorporated in consultants’ sense of self (Alvesson & Robertson, 2006) and that consultants find it important for their self-identification to be among the best (Johnsen, Muhr & Pedersen, 2009).

Whether the fact that the identities of consultants are conflicted and sometimes separated is good or bad is not yet agreed upon within literature. For example, some consultants are aware of the fact that they are all work, but dream about a private life with a family (Muhr & Kirkegaard, 2013). In the study made by Costas and Flemming (2009) about self-alienation, it was found that consultants feel that ‘who they really are’ is the corporate self and that it is considered the unwanted self, an awareness that makes them depressed. The respondents in Costas and Flemming’s (2009) study also felt like they could not be themselves or 100% of their personality at work, and acted differently at work than outside of work feeling like they wore a mask that they would return at the end of the day. Johnsen, Muhr and Pedersen (2009) agree with this viewpoint by showing an example of a consultant who strives to separate from the workplace identity. The consultant means that it takes effort to distinct the authentic self from the corporate culture and that the fact that he is bad at handling himself makes him bad at handling his job. Furthermore, he argues that the consulting work demands the whole person; *“To be a productive corporate self, N needs to be more than this self.”* (Johnsen, Muhr & Pedersen, 2009, p. 212). Another related criticism is that consultants feel like they must perform to fit with the consulting ethos and that the consulting identity makes them feel standardised, leading to an unfavourable self-understanding (Alvesson & Robertson, 2006). Other negative consequences are boredom at work (Costas & Kärreman, 2016) and frustration (Alvesson & Robertson, 2006). In contrast to the criticism presented, there are also arguments for the positive side of consulting identities and its effect on self-identification. Mühlhaus and Bouwmeester (2016) have found that management consultants’ social identity as being high performing help them cope with the stress they experience from work. The study contributed with empirical evidence of that the idea to belong to an elite group increased consultants’ willingness to put effort into their job and work harder. Furthermore, elite constructions can help the employees function in their work context by promoting a secure sense of self (Alvesson & Robertson, 2006). Another benefit from the elite constructs, as discussed by Alvesson and Robertson (2006), is that it can be supporting for companies in attracting and retaining employees.

2.2. Influencing factors

In existing literature, different factors influencing employees’ ability to be themselves at work have been found. These factors have been grouped in four categories, which will be presented in the following sections.

2.2.1. Culture

Alvesson and Willmott (2002) have seen an increased managerial interest in the insides of employees, which may lead to trying to regulate the identity. Collinson (2003) explains that this can cause insecurity and discomfort, especially if not feeling true to yourself. Ultimately this can lead to employees trying to distance themselves from work, and the false identity they have there, by splitting self. This means that an employee divides the identity into work-me and real-me, which only exists outside of work (Collinson, 2003). Such physiological wall between the private and public self should not be encouraged (Burrell, 1988). A lot of researchers write about how firms within the management consulting industry try to incorporate consultants into the image of the firm (Alvesson & Robertson, 2006; Costas & Kärreman, 2016; Kipping & Clark, 2012). Kipping and Clark (2012) mean that consultants are encouraged to have a strong identification with the company and Kärreman and Alvesson (2009) agree with this by saying that conformity and homogeneity are part of the image of the firm. Even though this may lead to compliance from employees (Kärreman & Alvesson, 2009) and enhancement of a common purpose (Kipping & Clark, 2012), there is also a risk that consultants are losing track of who they are outside of work (Costas & Kärreman, 2016). Costas and Kärreman (2016) have found that management in consultancy firms seek to shape and influence the employees' selves through identity regulation, where consultants are encouraged to make sense of themselves in how the firm is portraying itself. While Costas and Kärreman (2016) mean that firms are trying to influence the private-self, Alvesson and Robertson (2006) take a different perspective by arguing that the elite identity within management consulting helps management ensure that consultants behave in accordance with the defined company image as well as ensuring self-discipline among consultants. To control the employees by influencing their self-definition is also being discussed by Kipping and Clark (2012) when arguing that culture can be a way for management to control the employees, for example through emotions and identification and that the values and beliefs of employees become aligned with those of the company. This reasoning is strengthened by Alvesson and Kärreman (2004), meaning that the socio-ideological control employed by management makes it hard for consultants to be their true self at work as they have to adapt to values and norms and where they are working in an environment where certain principles are justified and others are discarded.

2.2.2. Meaningful work

Kahn (1990) argues that one important factor for authenticity is to be able to perform personally meaningful work. When employees are feeling personally connected and interested in the work and the goals of the company, they are more eager to work hard (Sheldon & Elliot, 1999). Leroy and Palanski (2012) found something similar when arguing that performance at work is strongly related to aspects of the self of the employee. This has to do with the fact that employees' well-being often get negatively affected when work is not meaningful and they therefore tend to show less engagement (Hulin, 2014). Rich, LePine and Crawford (2010) agree when presenting matching values as another important factor for authenticity. However, it is not only at work researchers are finding optimistic connections of

authenticity. Goldman and Kernis (2002) explain that general authenticity is positively correlated with life satisfaction overall.

2.2.3. Social context

Chalofsky (2003) presents three different kinds of fears when explaining why some people fail to be themselves at work; fear of rejection, prejudice and misunderstanding. Richards (1995) agrees and argues that most organisations work hard to sustain the hygiene factors and create physical safety, but neglect the importance of emotional, mental and spiritual safety. All of this can be summed up into the concept of psychological safety, something Kahn (1990) defines as *“feeling able to show and employ one’s self without fear of negative consequences to self-image, status or career”* (Kahn, 1990, p. 708). This reasoning can be linked to a theme in the management consulting literature that has to do with how the relationship to feelings and emotions within the management consulting industry make it challenging for employees to express their whole selves at work (Kärreman & Alvesson, 2009; Mühlhaus & Bouwmeester, 2016). In addition to above mentioned characteristics of the management consulting industry, another feature that is contrary to the being yourself at work-literature is that the industry encourages rationality, emotional control and social distance (Kärreman & Alvesson, 2009). Mühlhaus and Bouwmeester (2016) agree with this by saying that the consulting work is stressful but that emotion-focused coping with stress is discouraged and if consultants show signs of emotions, such as crying, they risk social exclusion from the group. However, when Ménard and Brunet (2011) discuss this in a leadership context, they argue that managers who are themselves at work experience positive outcomes.

2.2.4. Profession & Industry

In addition to above mentioned factors, the management consulting literature also discuss the consulting profession and the industry. Several researchers have written about how the profession and industry makes it challenging for individuals to be all of themselves at work (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2004; Costas & Kärreman, 2016; Muhr & Kirkegaard, 2013). The management consulting industry has a strong focus on competitiveness and comparison among consultants (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2004) and the consulting identity is considered attractive and something to aspire for (Costas & Kärreman, 2016). A consequence of the characteristics within the industry is that the consulting work becomes a lifestyle, where the job is put first and where the self, family and friends are put aside (Johnsen, Muhr & Pedersen, 2009). Furthermore, it is also argued that titles and promotions are significant features within the management consulting industry which may lead to performance anxiety among consultants (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2004), something that fits well into the picture of an industry where the work-self is considered the most prominent definition of self.

Firms within the management consulting industry are highly selective in their recruitment (Costas & Kärreman, 2016) and there is a natural selection of high performers (Muhr & Kirkegaard, 2013). Some argue that it is hard for consultants to make a distinction between performance and the understanding of self (Humble & Pedersen, 2010), something that becomes especially challenging in an industry where performance is measured in hard terms

and values (Muhr & Kirkegaard, 2013). In order to cope with the circumstances within the management consulting industry, such as competence-based competition, consultants need to put their sense of self aside and focus on the consulting identity (Kipping & Clark, 2012). This argument is supported by Kärreman and Alvesson (2009) who argue that the social identities and processes within management consulting provide comfort and security. However, the firms themselves do not always fully understand the environment within the industry. For example, Costas and Flemming (2009) found that management believed that their culture was characterised by diversity, difference and inclusion while the employees' view of the culture was robotic and "*long hours, just long hours*" (p. 365). There is pressure on consultants to be predictable (Kärreman & Alvesson, 2009) and the elite identity is needed in order to be able to give advice to clients (Alvesson & Robertson, 2006). In firms within the management consulting industry, individuals are viewed as perfectly exchangeable, replaceable and insignificant. Firms are set up as standardised and impersonal systems, where firms try to reduce reliance on unique skills. The recruitment of a homogeneous workforce leave little focus on the individuals, and the fact that consultants have to act in standardised and predetermined ways make it challenging for them to be themselves at work (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2004; Kärreman & Alvesson, 2009). As a contrast, however, other argue that some level of discrepancy between the self-identity and the consulting-identity works as long as it is not too strong (Kipping & Clark, 2012).

2.3. Organisational Actions

Even though there are different opinions in academia regarding what should and what could be done from an organisational perspective in order to increase employees' ability of being themselves at work, the body of research is very limited. The field of research discussing how to manage specific factors is, unfortunately, also very limited. Therefore, it should be pointed out that the organisational actions presented below have no distinct connection to the previously mentioned factors found in literature. Furthermore, there are no concrete studies on the topic from a management consulting perspective, even though some researchers have touched upon the topic in related studies (Alvesson & Robertson, 2006; Costas & Flemming, 2009; Humle & Pedersen, 2010; Kipping & Clark, 2012).

Costas and Flemming (2009) argue that leisure events with pictures posted on the website afterwards reduce the feeling of self-alienation. Alvesson and Robertson (2006) on the other hand, discuss clothing and mean that a separation between client work and internal work should be made so when working at client site, consultants should dress formal but when working at the home office, consultants are free to dress casually.

Another theme that is discussed in literature is how organisations can create an environment supporting employees in being themselves at work. According to Bernstein, Bunch, Canner and Lee (2016), employees need reliability and adaptability from the organisation in order to fully bring themselves to work. Another much related aspect in creating psychological safety is perceived organisational support (Rich, LePine & Crawford, 2010). Kahn (1990) further explains that it is important to feel an organisational flexibility which allows employees to take some risks, and perhaps even fail sometimes, without being afraid of the potential

consequences. When the perceived organisational support is lacking or missing, employees tend to put up a guard and instead feel disengaged, which means that they will have a harder time to be their true self (Kahn, 1990; Rich, LePine & Crawford, 2010). This has also been discussed within the management consulting literature. For example, Kipping and Clark (2012) have written about how organisational culture characterised by trust leads to openness and an increased willingness to share failures. A related argument is stated by Humle and Pedersen (2010), who argue that leadership is important for the consultants' identity work.

Mitroff and Denton (1999) believe that spirituality should be integrated into management. Schmidt-Wilk, Heaton and Steingard (2000) take this further and argue that organisations can be spiritual, not only individuals. They further explain that by integrating values, ethics and emotions in the organisation's behaviour and policies, it becomes spiritually oriented (Schmidt-Wilk, Heaton & Steingard, 2000). This goes well in line with the findings of Mitroff and Denton (1999), who discovered a correlation between the perception of more spiritual organisations being more profitable. The reason for this is the increased ability to bring more of the complete self to work. Organisations need to learn how to encourage employees to bring the spiritual energy, which is considered to be the core of everyone (Mitroff & Denton, 1999).

2.4. Summary

In existing literature, there are a number of concepts related to 'being yourself at work'. What has been found and explored are two general concepts, authenticity and identity, and two specific concepts, holacracy and wholeness. Looking at the topic from a management consulting perspective, the concept has not yet been defined in literature. The body of literature discussing what this really means is thin and instead more focused on defining what it means to not being yourself at work, where emphasis to a high degree is put on the consulting profession. Many researchers have discussed the separated identities consultants experience and how they adapt to the consulting identity in favour of who they really are.

In spite of the small body of research related to the meaning of the concept, the literature presents a number of factors argued to influence employees' ability to be themselves at work. However, as for the definition, most literature are focused on the challenges rather than the enabling factors. In the management consulting context, the profession in itself is a major barrier, both in terms of characteristics of the work and tasks, but also the expectation of the consulting identity. Another factor is culture and how it risks blurring the line between the identity of the individual and that of the organisation. The more general literature also mentions factors related to tasks and values, but also talks about enabling factors such as safety. Another major difference between the management consulting industry and the more general literature is relationships, which is argued to play an important role when looking at the concept in a general sense but not mentioned within the management consulting literature.

What actions organisations can undertake to support employees' feeling of being themselves at work is a topic that, as of today, is rather unexplored within literature and has no direct connection to the underlying factors. However, culture is stressed as something organisations should work with, where they should focus on creating a culture characterised by reliability,

support and trust. It is also important that organisations create an environment where failures are accepted and discussed. Within management consulting, leadership is important to pay attention to, and in the more general sense, researchers argue that spirituality and emotions should be integrated in management and policies. The management consulting literature also discuss that consultants, at least at the home office, should be free to choose their clothing.

In conclusion, the literature defines the concept of being yourself at work as something related to authenticity, holacracy, identity and wholeness. There are a number of barriers such as the profession in itself and organisational culture, but also some enabling factors such as psychological safety. Also the tasks and being able to perform meaningful work play an important role. The actions that organisations can undertake do, to a great extent, relate to culture and management.

3. Methodology

This third chapter presents the methodology chosen for this study. The chapter starts with a discussion of research strategy and research design, continues with a description of the methods for data collection and data analysis, and ends with a discussion of the research quality.

3.1. Research Strategy

For this research, a qualitative research strategy has been chosen. The qualitative approach emphasises and allows for the participants to express their thoughts with their own words which help to get an understanding of their individual feelings (Bryman & Bell, 2015). This is something that was highly valuable in order to explore the concept of being yourself at work within the management consulting industry. The subjective approach that a qualitative research strategy enables also provides nuances which are desirable and especially suitable in this case when the existing knowledge base is weak (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Furthermore, due to the purpose of the study, qualitative research strategy has advantages in focusing on the objective of the interviewee rather than the researchers and being close to reality. This, in line with qualitative research being suitable when the approach is unstructured (Bryman & Bell, 2015), makes a qualitative research strategy a well-motivated decision for this research.

The research question is exploratory which means that there are no pre-set answers to test or evaluate (Bryman & Bell, 2015). This is preferable since there is little written in academia about this topic. In order to avoid preconceptions regarding the possible answers to the research question, an inductive approach has been considered the best option. The inductive approach will generate new theory, rather than testing a hypothesis (Bryman & Bell, 2015). This allows for both increased flexibility and depth, something that will support the answering of the research question.

3.2. Research Design

In this research a single case study has been chosen, where the case in focus will be a company. A single case study is one of the most common research designs to choose, but for a good reason; it deals with complexity and detail like no other (Bryman & Bell, 2015). This provides focus and clear boundaries of one single organisation with a unique purpose which enables in-depth understanding (Bryman & Bell, 2015). This is also a sound decision with regards to the qualitative research strategy along with the exploratory research question. Valcon is considered an interesting case in its own, which is an argument further supporting the decision to choose this research design.

3.3. Research Method

For this research, both primary and secondary data collection processes have been carried out. For the literature review, secondary data was collected based on certain predefined criteria. For the empirical findings, primary data was collected through qualitative semi-structured interviews with employees at Valcon.

3.3.1. Secondary Data Collection

When the purpose and research questions had been formulated, a systematic literature review was undertaken. This allowed for an extensive and critical review of published sources of a specified subject (Bryman & Bell, 2015). For this study it also provided an overview, classification and evaluation of the relevant research field of ‘being yourself at work’, especially in a management consulting context. This also created the foundation for the primary data collection, by providing an understanding of relevant concepts and research topics. The gaps in academia that were found during this literature review also helped validate the purpose of this research.

In order to ensure an exhaustive literature review with a sufficient number of articles, multiple databases were used. However, with regards to the scope and size of this research, a decision was made to focus on the four different databases; Emerald, Google Scholar, JSTOR and SAGE Journals Online, based on their field, range and quality of content. In addition to this the references of interesting articles were also examined in order to find additional and similar research relevant for the study. The number of citations was considered when ranking the found articles and books, before examining the headings and abstracts. Some criteria were set prior to the data collection process, in order to further frame the research. These inclusion- and exclusion criteria are displayed in Table 2 to assure full transparency in the secondary data collection.

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Peer reviewed	Not written in English, Danish or Swedish
Published in established academic journals	Specific focus not in line with this thesis

Table 2: Inclusion and exclusion criteria for the secondary data collection

3.3.2. Primary Data Collection

The primary data was collected through qualitative interviews. The reason for choosing qualitative interviewing was that this enabled a focus on the interviewees’ point of view. Interviews also allow for flexibility (Bryman & Bell, 2015), something that was especially valuable in this case where the existing knowledge base is weak. Furthermore, with regards to the purpose of the study, another argument for choosing qualitative interviewing is that it opens up for rich and detailed answers.

As the research has an inductive approach and the research question is exploratory, the decision to keep the interviews open was made. However, as the research base is weak and the purpose of the study is to fill certain gaps in existing research, it was important to make sure that these topics were covered in the data collection. Therefore, in order to leave room for flexibility but at the same time making sure that some topics were covered, an interview guide (Appendix A) was created and the interviews were semi-structured, all in accordance with the recommendations made by Bryman and Bell (2015).

3.3.2.1. Sample

The interviewees were selected through purposive sampling. The method is common in qualitative research, and has the benefit in researchers being able to select respondents based on certain predetermined criteria (Bryman & Bell, 2015). For this research it was considered the best option to get access to relevant and representative respondents within a large spectrum. However, the reader of this research should be aware of the bias in that the criteria have been selected based on the researchers' judgement and that the case company itself was involved in identifying interview objects.

In order to, with regards to the chosen research strategy, try to maximise the generalisability of the results, the main focus when selecting respondents was to have a maximum variation sample. In this case, it meant that people were selected based on variety in age, gender, time with the company and nationality. Furthermore, in order to get a nuanced understanding, it was also important to capture respondents with different roles and with different experience from the studied topic. However, what all persons in the purposive sample had in common was that they had been employed within the case company for a minimum of six months.

The sampling process started off with a meeting together with Valcon where a list of potential interviewees that fulfilled the criteria was created. The 10 persons were then contacted via email (Appendix B), which resulted in eight persons agreeing to participate. Due to the high degree of confidentiality mentioned previously, there is no list of the respondents and their specific details.

3.3.2.2. Interview Guide

The interview guide (Appendix A) was created mainly based on the research question, but also in consideration of the literature review. It consists of different topics and is divided into the three themes of definition, factors and actions. The questions were carefully formulated to stay neutral and open, while at the same time trying to be as clear as possible, something which Bryman and Bell (2015) argue is of high value. This was to ensure that the questions would be understood correctly and similarly by all interviewees. The interview guide presents the main questions, but there was also room for follow up questions or additional topics to be discussed and further elaborated on, as recommended by Bryman and Bell, 2015. The interview guide starts off with general questions about the interviewee and the subject, to ease into the situation. The definition is then explored from the interviewee's perspective before moving into more specific questions.

3.3.2.3. Pilot Interview

In order to make sure that the interview guide was adequate and actually covered and investigated what was intended, Bryman and Bell (2015) suggest the use of a pilot interview. One pilot interview was therefore conducted before the actual primary data collection started. Since the questions in the interview guide are open, the pilot interview was crucial in order to get an understanding of what kind of answers the questions would result in. The insights following the pilot interview led to the re-formulation of some questions, while others were added and some were removed. The major insight that came from the pilot interview was regarding the phrasing of the questions, in order to make them as smooth and innocent as

possible. Taking this into consideration improved both the process for the interview as well as the outcome of the primary data collection.

3.3.2.4. Interview Process

Since the topic of this research might be perceived as private it was considered necessary to create a relaxed, comfortable and safe interview situation for the respondents. This was done in four main ways by allowing for preparation, anonymity, preferred language and video call.

A few days before each interview an email (Appendix C) containing the interview guide and information regarding the interview set-up was sent out. This gave the respondents time to prepare and familiarise themselves with the questions. As all respondents were promised anonymity, their names and details will not be presented in this thesis due to confidentiality reasons. Fortunately, the identities of the respondents' are not significant to fulfil the purpose of this research. The respondents had different nationalities and following Bryman and Bells (2015) recommendation it was decided that giving the option to choose which language to use during the interview would strengthen the desired interview situation. The respondents were therefore encouraged to choose the language he/she felt most comfortable with. The result of this was interviews being held in Swedish, Danish and English. One interview was held at the company office in a secluded room, while the rest of them were held over video call. The ability to see and interact with each other in more ways than through sound is preferable to ensure more nuanced communication (Bryman & Bell, 2015). In this specific case the video call is a commonly used tool within the case company, meaning that the respondents have experience with it and are familiar with using it.

All interviews were recorded with each respondent's consent. This ensured that all data was captured correctly and allowed full attention to the interviewee during the interview, which is also in accordance with the recommendations by Bryman and Bell (2015). No extensive notes were therefore taken during the interview, but the attention was instead directed to what was being said by the interviewee and the creation of follow up questions. After each interview the recording was transcribed. The transcriptions allowed the collected data to be coded and analysed, but also made sure that the exact citations from the respondents could be used (Bryman & Bell, 2015). The citations were later sent to each respondent for validation, which according to Bryman and Bell (2015) is something that decreases the risk of subjectivity and increases the credibility of the data. Details about the interviews are found in Appendix D.

3.4. Data Analysis

In this research a thematic analysis approach has been used. There are many options when choosing the type of method to conduct the analysis, but mostly the decision is depending on the amount of data gathered and suitability (Bryman & Bell, 2015). The idea of choosing a thematic analysis was to identify and explore themes and subthemes within the collected data. This allows for finding and analysing patterns and themes in the data (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Furthermore, it is considered one of the most common and flexible alternatives for data analysis according to Bryman and Bell (2015).

The thematic analysis process started off by reading and rereading the transcriptions until the authors got familiar with the data. This allowed for the creation of a deeper understanding of the collected data (Bryman & Bell, 2015). When familiar with the data, the process of identifying potential patterns, similarities and repetition began. Bryman and Bell (2015) argue that it is of importance to find patterns of repetition, although it is not a sufficient criterion alone to identify themes. To be considered a theme it is of significant importance that the recurring themes are relevant to the focus of the research (Bryman & Bell, 2015). When the subthemes were identified it was time to go through them once again and refine them. Some of them turned out to not actually be subthemes, and some of them were very similar to other themes or subthemes. The analysis concerning organisational actions in chapter 5.3 is carried out in relation to the previous chapter of influencing factors (5.2). This is as the actions (5.3) naturally follow the result of the factors (5.2). All themes and subthemes found in the coding process can be found in Appendix E.

3.5. Research Quality

In order to get an overview of the quality of the research and conclusion, it is necessary to present the objectives of validity and reliability (Bryman & Bell, 2015). A discussion of the two research criteria will therefore be held in the two following sections.

3.5.1. Validity

To ensure a high external validity, the level of the ability to generalise the findings should be high (Bryman & Bell, 2015). However, being a qualitative study of a single case company with a limited sample, the generalisability, and thereby the external validity, should be considered to be low. With regards to this issue, and in an attempt to increase the external validity, the research question was carefully defined. In addition to that, a detailed description of the collected data has been provided. However, considering that the purpose of this study was not to find a universal solution to how anyone can be him- or herself at work, but rather to explore what underlying factors and supporting activities exist, the lower external validity should be deemed acceptable.

The internal validity, on the other hand, concerns causality in the study and measure how well the conclusions match the empirical findings (Bryman & Bell, 2015). The internal validity was increased by having each respondent formulate the definition of 'being yourself at work'. In addition to that, all interviews were transcribed and validated, which further increased the internal validity by decreasing the risk of misinterpretation, something which ultimately could lead to questionable conclusions.

3.5.2. Reliability

The external reliability checks for the degree of replicability (Bryman & Bell, 2015) and the consistency of finding the same results if repeated. This is generally more difficult to achieve in qualitative research than in quantitative research (Bryman & Bell, 2015). The semi-structured interviews weaken the replicability, while the use of an interview guide strengthens it since the same questions are being repeated. The reader should also be aware of the impact following the specific frames of structure and time for this study. However, in order to

increase the possibility of replicating this study, thorough explanation and motivation of all steps have been presented. This, together with described details of the research procedures, are done with the intention of increasing the possibility of replicating the study in the future, which can be argued strengthen the reliability. As Bryman and Bell (2015) state about qualitative research in general, the result of this study should not be generalised. However, as the purpose of this study is to contribute to an increased understanding of the broad, complex and subjective topic of ‘being yourself at work’, rather than generalising its results, this research could contribute to an increased knowledge base for future adoption.

Internal reliability refers to the inter-observer consistency (Bryman & Bell, 2015), which means that if a research is conducted by more than one person, they should reach as high agreement as possible. In this research this was ensured by bi-validation of the collected data. Both authors participated in all interviews, while the transcriptions were coded individually, before the following analysis was performed together by discussing and reaching consensus. This ensured high internal reliability.

4. Empirical Findings

This chapter will present the empirical findings from the interviews with employees at Valcon. The presentation of the empirical findings will follow the structure of the literature review, and thereby consists of three main parts; definition, influencing factors and organisational actions. Definition is divided into 'identity', 'expressions' and 'relationship', while the influencing factors and the organisational actions are divided into the four areas 'consulting', 'individuality', 'workplace' and 'structures'. The reason for this is that the organisational actions are connected to the influencing factors.

4.1. Definition

When defining and elaborating upon the concept of being yourself at work, all respondents talk about it in a positive way. All of them either talk about the advantages of being yourself at work, the importance of being yourself at work or the disadvantages of not being yourself at work.

Respondent A says that even though being yourself at work is more or less easy in certain situations, it is always important. After starting to work full-time, respondent B realised how important it is as you spend so much time there. As respondent D states it; *"If you are not able to bring the whole self at work, and you are maybe there for 12 hours a day, when will you then be yourself?"*. However, respondent B and C mean that it is more or less important in different situations. For example, respondent B feels that it is less important when sitting together with older colleagues because in those situations, the own contribution to the discussion is less important. On the contrary, respondent D says that it is especially important to be yourself at work when being in contact with other people, both colleagues and clients. The task you are doing can also have impact on the importance of being yourself, argues respondent C. The respondent means that being yourself is more important when you do long-term work than when you do short-term work, but also that it is less important when you do analytical work and sitting alone in a room than when you work with execution and have a lot of client contact.

There is agreement among many of the respondents that the feeling of being yourself at work have positive effects for the individual. Respondent D argues that wholeness supports happiness and respondent C argues that you get more real connections to your co-workers if they feel that they are talking to a person rather than a role. Not being yourself, on the other hand, can be both exhausting, troublesome and stressful for the employee. Respondent B explains the feeling of being afraid to saying or doing the wrong things, and how that took away time from the tasks themselves, stating: *"If I know that I can be myself, I don't need to think about that and then I have more time to think of the tasks and doing a better job."*. Going into yourself and asking "How am I actually feeling?" improves your deliveries, argues respondent E. One summarising point in this matter comes from respondent E, arguing that *"I think it actually does a big difference when we sell projects and deliver projects that we are whole people."* It is not only for the individual well-being or performance being yourself at work is important, but also for Valcon as an organisation. Respondent D discusses the

importance of people in the management consulting industry by saying that “*When you work in the managing consulting industry, people welfare is extremely important, we have only people. And it is people in a business that can be very fast-pace, so for people to be able to relax in that sort of job, it is very important that you can bring whatever and whoever you are at work.*”.

When the respondents elaborate upon their understanding of the concept of ‘being yourself at work’, three main subthemes can be identified: identity, expressions and relationships. These three subthemes are summarised in the table below and will now be discussed in further detail.

4.1. Definition		
4.1.1. Identity	4.1.2. Expressions	4.1.3. Relationships
No mask/role	Feelings and emotions	Colleagues
Alignment	Integrity	Boss
Looks	Spirituality	Seeing each person
Interests	Vulnerability	Conversations
Values	Opinions	Involvement
	Thoughts	

Table 3: Overview of definition

4.1.1. Identity

Half of the respondents (C, D, E & H) specifically mention not having to bring and use a different mask when being at work. Respondent G and F explain that it is important for them to be able to not have to pretend to be someone else, and enter into a role at work. If someone is pretending to be in a certain way, respondent H says it is obvious that the person is not being him- or herself. Respondent B, F and H talk about the importance of having the freedom to be able to dress the way you want. Respondent B elaborates in saying that you should not have to wear a suit every day, or high heels, if you do not want to. Respondent E believes that there should not be a difference between who you are at work, and who you are when you are at home. Respondent E further elaborates that you should be true to your interests and who you really are, not trying to be someone else or try to fit in to a specific category. Respondent F is partly agreeing, but says that you should never be forced into showing more of yourself than you really want to or being too private. It should always be up to every single person how much he or she wants to share, and it can also be different levels of sharing each day. Respondent A highlights that people should not pretend to be smarter than they are.

4.1.2. Expressions

The respondents feel like one part of being themselves at work is connected to feelings and emotions. Respondent B says that, in order to be yourself, it is important to be honest. Respondent A claims that it is important to not hide your true feelings, or the fact that you are insecure. Another important thing, mentioned by respondent G, is that there should be a balance between standing up for your integrity and being professional. *“Even though we are professionals, it is ok to say no.”*, says respondent G. Respondent F explains something similar and argues that it is necessary to control your own integrity and being the one who decides what is ok and what is not. No one should be forced to share everything with everybody if that person does not feel like it, says respondent F. Being yourself at work is not about sharing everything with everybody, but having the power, and being allowed, to do so whenever someone wants to, explains respondent F. Respondent H further explains that a person never should question whether you are allowed to do, behave or say something in any situation.

Respondent G mentions, especially in crisis or when there is a deadline coming up, the importance in being allowed to handle that stress however you want. For respondent G it is valuable to breathe and find a centre within, and being left alone at times. Respondent F elaborates that it should be ok to show that you are happy but it should also be ok to show that you are sad. The respondent also claims that being with colleagues should be a safe space emotionally and highlights the importance of being allowed to bring all feelings to work. Respondent G argues that someone who never shows vulnerability, and is always on top of things is not being him- or herself. Respondent F agrees when arguing that people should dare to show their weaknesses in order to be true to yourself. Respondent D mentions that it is not just about bringing yourself to work, it is also about not being afraid to do so.

Respondent G mentions being close to your feelings and emotions when saying that it is important to show the customers that you are a person. Respondent G says that *“when I work with people, they get the whole me”* and means that it includes both being yourself at the home office, but also when you are working at client site. Respondent H agrees and further highlights that it is a win-win-win-situation for the employer, the employee and the customer by being able to show what you find especially engaging and what you are passionate about. On the same topic, respondent B claims that you should not only be able to say what you think, but there must also be awareness of the fact that your input matters and that people listen to what you have to say.

4.1.3. Relationships

Many respondents feel that being themselves at work is closely related to having different types of relationships. Respondent B argues that having someone at work to talk to, not only about work but also about private life, is essential. The respondent also mentions that in order to allow and to encourage employees to be themselves at work, there needs to be acceptance to do so. That acceptance is created and upheld by people around you in the organisation, such as your colleagues and your boss.

Respondent E talks about the importance of seeing and treating each person as a human being instead of as a role or position. This is agreed upon by respondent B, saying that having not only a boss and colleagues at work but also friends are important for being yourself at work. Respondent E states an example of this by saying that it is always possible to call your boss and explain a situation or ask for advice. Respondent G mentions that the allowance to bring yourself to work is a cornerstone which is upheld by colleagues. The respondent further explains that this is done by having honest conversations at work. Respondent C has some additional thoughts on this and believes that being yourself at work is not only about being allowed to exist in that common work space as you are, but about being allowed to form that work space together with others, to make it your common space.

4.2. Influencing Factors

This part will present the influencing factors mentioned by the respondents. This section is divided into the four identified areas, where the first area is concerning the working role and tasks connected to consulting. The second area is ‘individuality’ such as age, nationality, personality, generation and experience. ‘Workplace’ is the third area which includes culture, colleagues, meetings and other activities related to the actual workplace. The fourth and last area is ‘structures’, where hierarchy, leadership and development is being discussed.

Influencing Factor Areas			
<i>Consulting</i>	<i>Individuality</i>	<i>Workplace</i>	<i>Structures</i>
Expectations	Demographics	Colleagues	Hierarchy
Characteristics	Personality	Culture	Leadership
Tasks	Generation	Office	Development
Professionalism	Experience		Evaluation

Table 4: Overview of influencing factor areas

4.2.1. Consulting

All the respondents are touching upon the role as a consultant when discussing the influencing factors. However, they have different opinions to what extent, and in what way, it is affecting their ability to be themselves at work.

Respondent D reflects on the management consulting as a tough and fast paced job. Respondent E describes it like there is little room for small talk since you are often very busy and need to concentrate on your tasks. Respondent A agrees but states that there are not more of a problem at Valcon than it is at any other place. The respondent continues to say that the image of a consultant is that they should be very structured and have everything under control, even when that is not the case. This is something respondent A identifies as an aspect

of potentially failing to be yourself at work. Respondent E thinks that it is especially important to focus and put effort into enabling employees to be themselves at work in the management consulting industry, since it does not come as natural as in traditional businesses. Respondent E claims that there are many differences between consulting and non-consulting businesses, and gives a few examples such as not having the same office or colleagues, and having shifting managers. This ultimately leads to a larger network, but less close relationships at work. Respondent G is having similar thoughts and argues that there are many different sides connected to being a consultant that employees in non-consulting companies does not have to deal with, and that makes it more tough being yourself at work as a consultant. *“In order for us to grow as individuals and as a company I find it important to be yourself both internally in your consultancy firm as well as with the customer, so that’s kind of double and can make it double hard.” - Respondent G*

Respondent E is saying that it is a fight to be yourself within consulting. The respondent further explains that it is harder in the beginning, coming in feeling like there is a specific role or box to fit into as a consultant. Respondent G states that clients push the consultants hard sometimes, both in terms of the amount of work but also in terms of the outcome they expect or wish for. Respondent B continues to explain the struggles with constantly having to show that you are good enough and on top of things. Respondent E mentions that there are certain restrictions on how to behave at a client’s site. One example of this, mentioned by respondent B, is the fact that the consultants are expected to mirror the client’s dress code. Respondent A believes that there are different expectations to the role as a consultant when being with clients and being with colleagues. Respondent E also feels like there is an expectation of performing better than the client, saying that *“There is of course some part of you that know that you just have to focus on delivering.”* Respondent A says that it is part of the job that you cannot know everything, but that you sometimes are being presented as an expert even though that is not always the case. The respondent further explains that these are the situations where it is most conflicting being yourself at work. Respondent F argues that people sometimes mixes up being yourself with being unprofessional, which is wrong. The respondent continues to explain that being yourself and being professional are not two different opposites, but two things which should blend smoothly and are just as important.

4.2.2. Individuality

The respondents are agreeing on the fact that all people are different, and that it therefore is natural that there are individual factors affecting the ability, need and possibility for employees to be themselves at work. *“Maybe, some of them are just not that kind of people.”* says respondent E, meaning that ‘being yourself’ might not be for everyone. Respondent H is arguing that it should be up to each and every one to decide if you want to be yourself at work. This is further elaborated upon by respondent G, saying that it comes down to who you are and how willing you are to open up to everybody else. Respondent H thinks this have to start with finding and discovering yourself. Respondent F believes that the motivation for being yourself comes mostly from within, depending on who you are and your personality. The same respondent also believes that employees have different demands for being yourself. Respondent B discusses the fact that it is individual how easy and natural it is for employees

to be able to being themselves at work. This is exemplified by respondent F, saying that it is easier to observe whether or not an extroverted person is being him- or herself than an introverted person.

Respondent C takes a different perspective, questioning whether everyone really knows who they are. Also, the respondent means that this awareness is necessary in order to be yourself. Respondent H believes it has to do with age and perhaps also gender, considering women being outnumbered by men. Respondent G is arguing that being grounded at home is an influencing factor and mentions that calmness and peace at home is necessary in order to fully be yourself at work. Respondent C says that you need to take an active decision to be yourself. Respondent H claims that all people working as consultants are intelligent people, and that they therefore have it in them. Respondent E means that there are some prejudice that people who go into consulting are insecure overachievers, which might make it tougher for new employees entering the business, at least in the beginning.

Respondent A, B and F say that one important factor is the amount of time you have been working. Respondent B continues and explains that you do not feel as safe in the beginning when you do not know the people or the routines at work. Respondent A, D and E argue that besides having less experience, you are also unsure what to expect from the client. Furthermore, you are often thrown around a lot in the beginning, constantly facing new situations. Respondent E says that as a new consultant, you do not know if it is ok to say no when a client do not share your values. Respondent D mentions that there is a risk that young and inexperienced consultants feel like they need to pretend to be more professional than they are, saying that *“So there is maybe a risk of people pretending to be a little more professional, to compensate for being a little young.”* Respondent A and H believe that the more experienced you get, the more confident you will be in what you are doing, which eventually will make it more natural and easy to be yourself. Respondent E says that employees that have been with Valcon for more than two years are themselves to a higher extent than those who have not. Respondent D, on the other hand, argues that young people today are coming in with a new mind-set and are more aware of the importance of bringing themselves to work. The respondent also points out that something has changed and that young people are more relaxed and attracted to the idea of being yourself at work.

4.2.3. Workplace

Another factor being discussed by all respondents is the workplace. Respondent B argues that the free seating at the office has a negative impact on the ability to be yourself considering the ongoing struggle to find the preferred seating, and further exemplifies that it is especially problematic if you want to work in a silent and undisturbed environment. The culture at the office is very important according to respondent B, D, E and F. Respondent D explains that having a warm and open culture is important in order to enable as many different personalities as possible. The respondent also states that the celebration of diversity should be highlighted to make space for everybody to be themselves. Respondent F agrees and says that it is essential to accept different personality types. Respondent E explains that since there is not only one type of person who is the ultimate consultant, a culture where diversity is

encouraged allows and shows that you can be a consultant in many ways, and that you do not have to fit into one specific category.

Respondent B identifies positive effects of having offices in both Sweden and Denmark, and mentions that the different cultures and ways of working enhances collaborations and provides different perspectives. Respondent A, on the one hand, says that there is no difference between Denmark and Sweden. Respondent D, on the other hand, mentions that there are differences between the countries but that these do not affect the ability to be yourself at work.

Respondent A argues that being yourself at work comes down to the people you are surrounded with, a statement that many of the other respondents (B, C, E, F & H) agree on. Respondent B explains that the most important factor is to have someone you trust and who you can talk to at work. Respondent C says that if other people at work are themselves, it is much easier for you to be yourself too. Respondent E agrees and elaborates that another important thing is how you are being met when you are yourself at work. Respondent B explains that if colleagues would question, try to silence or not accept you when you are being yourself, it would have a negative impact on your future ability to be yourself at work. Respondent E and F believe that you need to build and have a network of trust before you can really be yourself at work. Respondent E also mentions a safe space environment at the home office as one of the most important factors. It gets more challenging when the company grows and more people enter, claims respondent H when stating; *“It is easier to be close and good friends in smaller companies where everyone knows everybody.”*

4.2.4. Structures

Leadership is mentioned by respondent A, B, E and F as an influencing factor. Respondent B says that the people in leadership roles have the power to create an atmosphere where you feel like you are allowed to be yourself. Respondent F argues that previous experiences with managers have influenced and affected the ability to be yourself at work, both with regards to trust and safety. Respondent E mentions that leadership support, especially from the project manager or line manager is necessary when things are going wrong, and further says that pure and good leadership is not a given in consultancies and gives example of egos being a big part of the business. When saying *“I am a little bit doubtful on whether the partners and senior partners are feeling that they totally can be themselves.”* respondent E claims that the ego may potentially limit the ability to be yourself, especially at senior level.

Leadership is also discussed from another perspective, where respondent F says that it is important to be yourself in order to be a great leader for other employees. Respondent A describes that some people behave differently when there is a boss around and says that the relationship to your superior therefore is an influencing factor. When getting a new line manager, the respondent says that there are certain structures that need to be in place in order to really connect. *“We sort of have to establish ground rules before I feel completely confident about being my true self.”*, explains respondent A.

Respondent F continues to state that Valcon’s internal meetings should be a safe space for everyone to be themselves. Respondent H argues that the ability to affect your work and working situation is important, while hierarchies can make it harder and therefore have a negative impact on the ability to be yourself at work. Respondent F also explains that if you feel like you are not reaching your targets as planned, you may feel stressed. That stress may ultimately have a negative effect on the ability to be yourself at work.

4.3. Organisational Actions

Organisational Action Areas			
<i>Consulting</i>	<i>Individuality</i>	<i>Workplace</i>	<i>Structures</i>
Projects	Acceptance	Culture	HR
Industry	Meaning	Relations	Leadership
		Workspace	Development
			Processes

Table 5: Overview of organisational action areas

In the following sections, the empirical findings about organisational actions for being yourself at work will be divided into the same areas as the influencing factors, and then further into what Valcon are doing today and what Valcon can do further in the future.

4.3.1 Consulting

4.3.1.1. Today

One subtheme of actions is related to the role or task itself. Respondent H mentions an action related to the challenge some consultants feel about being left alone on a project. Respondent E is also discussing that the way the organisation is talking about consulting, both as a service and as a profession, enable people to be themselves at work. The respondent means that the CEO is more focused on the impact the company makes on client site, rather than the money. Another statement made by the same respondent is that “*Valcon is maybe the consultancy house that is most embracing of different kinds of young people and also saying that you don’t have to work 80 hours to be consultant here.*”.

4.3.1.2. Future

Respondent A, F and H mention role and/or task oriented actions. Respondent A means that Valcon can reduce the risk of feeling tense, and thereby enable the feeling of being yourself by making sure to not sell the consultants as experts when that is not true. Respondent H also mentions things related to expectations, but is more focused on the younger consultants. This respondent suggests that Valcon should make it easier for younger consultants to realise that

they do not have to fit into a specific role. Last but not least, respondent G means that an important question is how to take the ability of being yourself to the market.

4.3.2. Individuality

4.3.2.1. Today

In terms of individuality, respondent C says that there is nothing Valcon can do in order to enable the employees to be themselves, but that it is up to each and every one. However, respondent B argues that Valcon is creating a space where it is ok for the employees to be different and have different needs, for example by asking for work preferences, and that the organisation should be adapted to both introverted and extroverted people.

4.3.2.2. Future

Respondent B, C, D, E and F discuss whether the company or the individual is responsible for enabling the feeling of being yourself at work. Respondent C means that Valcon cannot do anything because it is up to each individual. However, this respondent means that what Valcon can do is to create a space where it is ok to be yourself at work, and invite people to join that space. Respondent F has a fairly similar point, saying that the individual should look for a workplace where he or she feels that it is accepted to bring all of who you are. However, respondent E argues that the feeling of what it means to be yourself at work is individual, why Valcon should look not only at initiatives, but also a bit more on what it means for the individual. The same respondent also says that *“Starting actually to talk about the things that matters crossing the line of private and working conditions could actually be a good and subtle way.”*

4.3.3. Workplace

4.3.3.1. Today

Most of the things Valcon are doing today are related to workplace, with a strong focus on culture. As respondent D expresses, it has been easy for Valcon to adopt to the wholeness agenda because of the relaxed corporate culture that lies in the DNA of the company. Respondent D also claims that one of the things that people would say they value in the Valcon culture is that you do not need to pretend to be somebody else, and that this kind of business culture has been there since the beginning. As a contrast to this argument, respondent H says that it has been challenging to keep the same culture when the company has grown and, for example, when the company moved from Hørsholm to the office in Copenhagen. Furthermore, both respondent A and D mention that the culture is caring, which is evident in that you can always reach out for help and that people are relaxed and like to spend time together. Also, respondent G says that you can always go and talk to someone if something is difficult, and that the way you can talk to other people is different from what the respondent has experienced in other companies. One concrete thing Valcon is doing to maintain their enabling culture is their recruitment process. Respondent A means that much has to do with the way the company recruits people, and that they recruit people that they actually believe are good people. Respondent B talks about the experience from the recruitment process where

the impression was that the company is working with the 'being yourself at work'-agenda, and that Valcon therefore is a different kind of consulting firm.

Another common subtheme that is identified within the field of workplace have to do with the dialogues that Valcon has opened up for, both related to being yourself at work but also related to happiness, stress and agility. As respondent G states *"I think it's so cool that we have this common language around what it does mean to be a whole person."* Respondent E also points out that the management team in Valcon understands that rather than going into solution mode, creating a language for something can actually be the solution in itself. Respondent G supports this and extends it not only to the management team but to the whole company and argues that people in the firm are willing to talk about what it actually means to be yourself at work. Another thing that respondent D and H mention is the happiness agenda, and the statement of having a goal of becoming the happiest company in the world. The respondents are also discussing the actions Valcon are undertaking in order to create a space for employees to meet. Respondent D mentions the small social events that are bringing people together, such as Friday evenings or morning runs, while Respondent C, G and E mention the breathing and meditation sessions.

4.3.3.2. Future

Respondent D means that in order to win the right talent, it is important to reinvent how you behave as a workplace and how you organise the workplace. Respondent B also discusses the workplace, and suggests that Valcon could further enable employees' feeling of being themselves at work by taking on actions related to the workplace, and especially because of the open work space that Valcon has. On the one hand, respondent B mentions that there should be more places so that you do not have to feel stressed because of fear of not having anywhere to sit. On the other hand, there should be more quiet zones for those who like to work in such environment. The respondent also mentions that more attention should be paid to respect those quiet zones.

Another emerging subtheme found in the interviews has to do with relationships among colleagues and how Valcon creates a space for colleagues to meet. Both respondent D and F believe that Valcon should take on more initiatives related to creating different kinds of groups where employees can meet. Respondent D means that there is a difference between young people and people with family when it comes to attending social events, and that building interpersonal relationship could be integrated in work, rather than asking people to invest their free time in doing that. Respondent F discusses that it might be a difference depending on the size of the office, that there may be smaller and tighter groups in a small office but that there are several kinds of groups in the head office and that the employee can feel where he or she belongs. This respondent also means that Valcon should try to work with various kinds of groupings, so that there are different options depending on for example age or interests.

4.3.4. Structures

4.3.4.1. Today

In terms of structure-related actions, many respondents focus on the positive impact they are experiencing from both line managers and project managers. Respondent B means that the company shows a willingness to support people to be themselves. For example, that line managers encourage you to dress like you want and let them know about preferred work environment. Both respondent A and B claim that whenever you face a problem, you can always call somebody at the office. Respondent B argues that even if you are a first-year consultant, you can always call a senior partner and they will show that you are important and that they want you to succeed. As also was discussed in the previous section, the management team has found a common language to discuss being yourself at work, something that respondent G means comes from the fact that the leaders have done some inner work themselves and see the value in it. Another good thing that leaders in Valcon do is to recognise stress, something that respondent H argues is important since consultants often balance between healthy and unhealthy stress.

Another structural thing enabling employees to be themselves that respondent E mentions is that when young consultants start, they are starting in a graduate programme together and that this group creates a safe space for them. Respondent F also highlights feedback, meaning that feedback is the most important thing enabling people to be themselves at work and that by giving feedback, you also show who you are. The respondent says that people at Valcon are good at feedback today, but that there is room for further improvement. Furthermore, respondent D also mentions that even though there are ranks within the company, they do not mean that much in the daily business and that this gives an impression of Valcon being an open place. The respondent says, for example, that the company is very flat and that nobody, not even the CEO, has a permanent seat.

4.3.4.2. Future

Regarding structures, respondent E, B and F mention actions that Valcon can undertake in order to further enable their employees to be themselves at work. Respondent B mentions how the cognitive tests in the recruiting interviews might affect what kind of people the firm employ. By focusing too much on cognitive ability, the respondent believes that there is a risk that Valcon misses people that would have been good for the 'being yourself at work'-agenda. Respondent B also discusses that different people have different needs in terms of how to gather information and knowledge, and that this have an impact on the ability of being yourself at work. Today, the respondent experiences that there are few written manuals and instead you are supposed to network and talk to people. For people who like to work alone or are busy, it would have been better if it were easier to find information, for example in manuals or in some other format.

Respondent E, on the other hand, focuses on leadership and means that *"it all points back to leadership, so leadership instead of managing or management"*. The discussion continues with suggestions concerning the development for a consultant, for example in terms of projects or clients. The respondent further elaborates on the personal development dialogue

that employees at Valcon have and argues that these currently are very Excel schematic, for example in terms of targets and contribution to the company, and not formed in a way that supports being yourself at work. Another development-related suggestion comes from respondent F, meaning that feedback is a very important enabler and that even though Valcon is good at it most of the time, there are periods when the company could be better at feedback. Furthermore, the respondent argues that it is important to create a climate where it is just as ok to talk about failure as about success. Doing that creates an organisational learning where the employees learn from each other and where it would be easier to be yourself all the time. In order to create such a climate, respondent F means that senior employees should be in the forefront of this.

5. Analysis

The fifth chapter contains the analysis based on the comparison of the literature and the empirical findings. It starts off with a discussion of the definition, before the influencing factors and organisational actions are examined.

5.1. Definition

The three found subthemes in the empirical findings (identity, expressions and relationships) can to varying extent be found within the literature. There are however differences in how the concepts are being discussed. This will be further examined in the following sections.

<i>Literature/Empirical findings</i>	Identity	Expressions	Relationships
Authenticity	x	x	
Holacracy	x		x
Identity	x		
Wholeness	x	x	

Table 6: Connecting the literature with the empirical findings

Over all, the empirical findings present a lot of opinions regarding what it is to not be yourself at work. It seems to be harder to define what being yourself at work really means, than to turn it around and say what it is not.

5.1.1. Identity

The respondents talk about not wearing a mask or enter a specific role in a similar way as Turner (1976) talks about authenticity. The subtheme of identity being found in the empirical findings is to a high extent aligned with the literature, even though they use different words and labels to describe the same phenomenon. The individualistic approach is also very apparent in holacracy, where every person is considered unique and important. Within holacracy it is also highlighted that you should be identified as a person, and who you are, not as a specific role within the company. A role is not who you are, but it is connected to something you do. This view is aligned with the respondents’ view of how they define ‘being yourself at work’. Respondent E does not think there should be a difference between who you are at home and at work, which is similar to how the literature on authenticity and wholeness argue about staying true to who you are at all times. Another thing respondent B, F, H and the literature agree on is the importance in having the freedom to dress the way you like, which is strongly connected to one’s identity.

Within the literature specifically concerning the management consulting industry, blurred lines between the individual and organisation have been identified (Alvesson & Robertson, 2006; Kipping & Clark, 2012). This is not found in the primary data collection. To not pretend to be someone else is claimed to be important to respondent G and F, which is closely linked with identity and being able to express your own identity. The literature explains that the identities of consultants may be conflicted and separated, due to the specific work conditions. This is something respondents' claim to have a negative impact on the ability to be yourself at work. Literature describes the management consulting industry as elitist with high expectations and pressure of performance. This goes not well in hand with the preferred setting of how to best be yourself at work, according to the empirical findings. Alvesson and Robertson (2006) state that this can create the feeling of standardisation, something which could be seen as the opposite of how the respondents' explain that they define how to be themselves at work, by preferring a high individual focus.

5.1.2. Expressions

The allowance of showing integrity, spirituality and vulnerability is important to the respondents when discussing the definition of being yourself at work. 'Expressions' is a distinct subtheme in the empirical findings, and can partly be found in the literature as well. The respondents are clear when expressing that in order to be yourself at work, there must be room to show feelings and emotions. But it is not only about being allowed to express them, it is also important to have the power to choose and decide when to show the feelings and emotions. It should be a choice. Employees are humans in a work context, and they should therefore have the freedom to be who they are and not restrict themselves. In order to be yourself at work, you need to stand up for your integrity says respondent F, something Laloux (2014) and the concept of wholeness would agree on.

Can you be yourself without showing feelings and emotions? No, you cannot claims Turner (1976), and argues that you are then lacking authenticity. The importance in not only being yourself, but being able to express it, and thereby being authentic, is an important notion. The literature within the management consulting industry is undecided whether or not expressing your feelings is that important for the definition. It rather argues that the employees' values should be aligned with the company's in order for the employee to be able to be him- or herself at work. It seems true that it would be easier for anyone to be themselves in a context similar to the individual, but that neglects and ignores people with different values than the company. In fact, it does not seem to encourage everybody to embrace wholeness, but rather the people already being similar to the desired ideal. The fact that the literature within management consulting industry express that matching values are important for a person and her ability to be herself at work seems flawed, and the fact that none of the respondents mentioned it during the interviews strengthens this view. It should not matter where you are, or how you are when trying to be yourself at work. As the individual responsibility of creating and experiencing wholeness (Laloux, 2014), it can be more or less difficult to do it in certain situations and organisations. However, both literature and the empirical findings agree on the necessity in being able, and allowed, to express feelings and emotions at work, in order to be yourself at work.

5.1.3. Relationships

Although ‘relationships’ is a clear subtheme found in the empirical findings, it is barely mentioned in the literature. Barrett-Lennard (1998) actually states that in order to be yourself you need to be free of influence from others. The respondents on the other hand puts the ‘being yourself at work-definition’ in the context of others. They value the interplay with others and mention that it would be harder to be yourself without the support of others, such as colleagues and bosses. The literature seems to be focused on the isolation of being yourself at work, while the empirical findings value and see the necessity in not doing so. In the definition of the concept of being yourself at work, involvement was a big part of it. It seems to be a neglected or unexplored topic within the literature. It is however interesting that the respondents at Valcon value relationships at work in connection to the ability of being yourself, while the focus of the literature is individual and personal. It seems like the literature and the empirical findings are looking at this from two different perspectives, and that the respondents at Valcon are at a further stage than the current literature is at right now.

The explanations and examples given by the respondents regarding the importance of relationships include daily conversations and seeing each person for who they are. In connection to the importance of expressions, respondent B claims that it is just as important to get acknowledged by feedback and confirmation of that people listen and cares about what you have to say and states that your input matter.

5.2. Influencing Factors

Out of the four subthemes identified in the empirical findings, three of them have been found in literature. While literature supports the subthemes consulting, workplace and structures, no support can be found for individuality. However, there are differences between the empirical findings and literature in how these subthemes are discussed. This will be further examined in the following sections.

Area	Consulting	Individuality	Workplace	Structures
Mentioned in literature	x		x	x

Table 7: Overview of influencing factors mentioned in literature

5.2.1. Consulting

In literature, the negative influence of managers trying to regulate consultant’s identities has been discussed by Alvesson and Willmott (2002). To some extent, this relates to the discussion some of the respondents had about the expectations consultants experience. However, the difference is that while literature specifies that the negatively affecting expectations come from management, the respondents discuss both expectations from clients and from the profession itself but does only mention managers as having a positive influence. This can also be related to the negative impact literature states that colleagues can have on the ability to be yourself at work. For example according to Alvesson and Kärreman (2004), there

are competition and comparison among consultants. In other words, the literature argues that the expectations come from within the organisation while the respondents indicate that the expectations come from outside the organisation. In this case, there are several possible explanations for the difference. The fact that Valcon operate in the management consulting context might make the external expectations more distinct, for example as the contact with clients is a large part of the work or that there are certain expectations about the profession. Another possible explanation for the difference might have to do with Valcon as an organisation, and that internal and negatively affecting expectations do not exist to the same degree as in other companies.

The group of factors related to the management consulting industry and profession was discussed by some of the respondents. When comparing these viewpoints with the management consulting literature it is possible to see both similarities and differences. Both literature and the empirical findings talk about the consulting identity and agree that there are expectations on consultants. For example, respondent E says that you have to fit into a role, something that goes hand-in-hand with the argument from Kipping and Clark (2012), saying that consultants should hide their sense of self in favour of the consulting identity. There are also agreements concerning the expectations on consultants to be rational. There is, however, a difference in the sense in which the consulting identity is discussed. Despite agreements that the consulting identity affects the ability to be yourself at work, there is disagreement on whether the consulting identity is good or not. While researchers such as Costas and Kärreman (2016) and Alvesson and Robertson (2006) discuss the benefits of the consulting identity, many of the respondents problematize the characteristics and expectations and argue that it is conflicting with their ability to be themselves at work. While there is evidence in literature that the strive for the consulting identity in itself can be an influencing factor, this does not seem to be the case at Valcon. Instead, the consequences of the consulting context in the daily work have negative influence on employees' ability to be themselves at work.

However, even though the management consulting industry and profession according to the respondents is an influencing factor, it can be questioned whether this really should be considered a factor that organisations should pay attention to. Instead, it could be considered something that comes with the industry and is out of the organisations' control. If that is the case, then the other factors are more relevant and might also be considered factors that mitigate the negative influence from the consulting industry.

5.2.2. Individuality

When comparing the interviews with the literature review, one interesting thing is that the individuality factors that are frequently discussed in the empirical findings are not being mentioned in the literature.

A couple of respondents mention age and experience as important factors influencing the ability to be yourself at work. For example, respondent A and H mean that as you get more experience, you also get more comfortable in showing who you are. Respondent D, on the other hand, means that the younger generation takes this more for granted and thereby are comfortable in being themselves at work. Even though these factors are not mentioned in

literature, they are still considered relevant factors. This is because they are mentioned by several respondents and that the discussions and arguments related to these factors go in-depth. Furthermore, the fact that the body of literature is thin and the topic has not been studied in this context in previous studies might be a reason for why these are not discussed in literature.

However, some of the individual-related factors are only mentioned by a few of the respondents and should maybe not be considered significant factors. This is, for example, the case for factors related to demographics. The reason for why those are mentioned by only a few respondents could either be that they only are important for certain individuals, for example dependent on your own gender or age, or that these kind of factors were not the first that came to mind when discussing it in an organisational or management consulting perspective.

5.2.3. Workplace

The cultural aspect discussed during the interviews goes hand-in-hand with both culture and values discussed in literature. However, literature means that culture can have a negative influence while the respondents stress the positive side of the culture. On the one hand, authors such as Costas and Kärreman (2016) and Kipping and Clark (2012) mean that firms try to regulate the identity of consultants and that they are encouraged to have a strong identification, something that can be argued to make it harder for consultant to be themselves at work. On the other hand, respondents mean that the open culture welcomes different personalities and that there is a culture where diversity is encouraged and where you do not have to fit into one specific category of people in order to be a consultant. The reason for the different viewpoints on this matter might have to do with the culture itself, meaning that culture can have either a positive or a negative influence depending on the specific culture. With this said, it can be argued that literature and the empirical findings agree on culture as an important factor.

Another workplace-related factor brought up in the interviews is colleagues, something that goes hand-in-hand with the psychological safety aspect mentioned by Kahn (1990) and Rich, LePine and Crawford (2010). As discussed in the consulting section, however, this is argued in literature to have a negative influence on the ability to be yourself at work since it can lead to competition among consultants. However, in the interviews colleagues are discussed as an important factor. There are differences in how the influence from colleagues are portrayed, something that may be explained by the fact that relationships are not emphasised in previous studies, but has in this study been shown as an important aspect of what it means to be yourself at work within the management consulting context. Relationships' importance for defining what it means to be yourself at work can be argued to go hand-in-hand with the positive influence colleagues have on this ability, thereby explaining the discrepancy between literature and empirical findings when it comes to emphasise the positive influence from colleagues.

During the interviews, the physical workplace was also mentioned as an important factor. For example, respondent B discussed the free seating that Valcon has and how this set-up made it

harder for people to be themselves at work, especially those who appreciate a silent workplace. The workplace was also mentioned in literature, however in a different context and not as an influencing factor. For example, the concept of holacracy discuss individuality and responsiveness in terms of time and place (Bernstein et al., 2016), something that can be interpreted that the employee is free to choose when and where to work. This definition relates to the statement from respondent B regarding individual needs for the workplace and therefore, having a workplace situation that fits your needs contributes to the ability to be yourself at work.

Another factor discussed during the interviews that relates to workplace and office is the difference between working at the home office and the client site, where it is both easier and more important to be yourself at the home office. This is not something that was discussed in the literature, and the reason for that may be that the experience from working at client site depends on what type of consulting it its. In the interviews, some of the respondents mentioned that Valcon works a lot at client site together with the client, something that might not be the case for the other consulting firms that have been studied within literature. When you do not work that much at client site, the distinction between client site and home office might not be a significant factor.

5.2.4. Structures

When it comes to structures, there are two areas in which literature and the empirical findings agree. The first one is hierarchy, where both mean that the position you have can make it harder for you to be yourself at work. Ménard and Brunet (2010) argue that there is some kind of taboo among leaders when it comes to being yourself at work, something that also respondent E mentions by saying that there is doubt whether seniors really are themselves at work all the time. Maybe it is so that there is not one specific position in the hierarchy that makes this so hard, but rather the fact that there are hierarchies. In the case of Valcon, respondent B says that even though there are hierarchies there is a benefit in that those do not make much sense in the daily business, something that support the argument that the hierarchy in itself is a constraining factor that organisations need to pay attention to, especially in consulting where hierarchies are so important.

There is also agreement on that structures related to evaluation and standardisation affects the ability to be yourself at work. Some researchers, like Alvesson and Kärreman (2004), argue that consultants are seen as standardised and perfectly exchangeable. This is also discussed in the empirical findings, especially by respondent H saying that there is a stress among consultants because of evaluation on performance, and especially the hard metrics. Another related area is recruitment, where Kipping and Clark (2012) mean that consulting has selection of high performers. Similar patterns can be seen in Valcon, for example stated by respondent B saying that the company has a strong focus on gates in the cognitive test. This might have to do with the fact that management consulting is a knowledge-intensive profession where those metrics are important for the evaluation of potential candidates. As this is often the first interaction with the company, organisations should still be aware of the fact that evaluation on mostly hard metrics have a negative impact on the ability to be yourself at work. In the case of Valcon, however, respondent B also mentions the positive

impression of Valcon in regards to being yourself at work, for example due to talking about personalities in the interviews.

5.3. Organisational Actions

Even though literature does not discuss how to meet specific influencing factors, literature and the empirical findings agree on two areas where organisations can take actions to enable employees to be themselves at work; workplace and structures. Consulting and individuality, however, are not mentioned in literature.

Area	Consulting	Individuality	Workplace	Structures
Mentioned in literature			x	x

Table 8: Overview of organisational actions mentioned in literature

5.3.1. Consulting

When it comes to consulting-related initiatives, there is a major difference between literature and the empirical findings in that nothing specific is mentioned in literature while the empirical findings both discuss how to talk about the industry in itself but also about how to facilitate for consultants when working on projects. However, as mentioned earlier, consulting might not be considered an influencing factor but more of a fact on how the industry and profession look like. If that is the case, there might be hard for organisations to take on actions, but what they could do instead is to look at the other three areas of factors. Maybe, if taking on actions in these instead and assuming that all factors in some way are connected to each other, it would have spill-over-effects and thereby making it easier for consultants to be themselves at work despite the context in which they are working.

5.3.2. Individuality

Another area where there is no alignment with literature is concerning actions related to the individuality factors. While nothing is mentioned in the literature, the respondents talk about acceptance towards diversity, but also that people’s needs and wants should be accepted. For example, respondent B discusses that workspace and structures should be adapted to different kinds of people, no matter if you for example are extrovert or not. What could be an explanation for this discrepancy is the fact that these individual factors are not mentioned in the literature at all, while they in the empirical findings are argued to play an important role. What organisations on the other hand should be aware of is diversity and that there are for example processes and structures that suit everyone. In other words, there might not be certain actions that organisations could take on, but rather having this in mind in all they do. Organisations need to understand that the concept of being yourself at work is subjective and that there is no single answer in what to do, but rather pay attention to different needs. Also, there is a need to raise individuality to a higher level and walk away from the standardised and hard-value measurement, as discussed earlier.

5.3.3. Workplace

When it comes to workplace, culture is a thing that has been stressed both by researchers and by the respondents. However, there is no agreement in what specific culture is preferred. For example, the empirical findings mention a relaxed culture while literature suggests reliability, adaptability, trust and willingness to share failure. Willingness to share failure, however, is also discussed in the empirical findings, for example by respondent F. The reason for the disagreement in what culture is preferred might have to do with the specific context of the company, for example in terms of location or size, and that different cultures can support the ability to be yourself at work depending on the context. Another discussion in this field is regarding how easy it is for the organisation to affect the culture in order to support the ability to be yourself at work, where both the empirical findings and literature argue that it takes time. Respondent D said that the culture lies in the DNA and that the enabling culture has been there since the beginning. Laloux (2014) has a similar reasoning, arguing that a slow transformation and a people-centric mind-set are needed. It is evident that there is no single answer to what culture is needed or how to reach this, but indeed cultural work is important for organisations to consider.

Last but not least, social events and creating relationships between colleagues have been brought up both by researchers and in the interviews. What the respondents highlighted, is the attention that should be paid to creating different kinds of meeting points, again showing that individuality is important.

5.3.4. Structure

A structural thing that organisations should focus on, according to literature and the respondents, is support. Literature discusses support in projects and in the consulting work, which the empirical findings also mention. However, the importance of support in being yourself at work was also stressed in interviews, and that leaders play an important role in shaping such a climate. In other words, what the empirical findings added to the literature is that organisations need to highlight that leaders and colleagues need to focus on more than just work-related support. Furthermore, it was also mentioned that consultants should be supported to dress the way they want. Clothing was also mentioned in literature, and it seems like opening up the dialogue for how to dress could be a step in enabling employees to be themselves at work. Even though the consulting profession has some limitations on dressing, much of the barrier lies in that employees worry about what is accepted and what is not, and thereby just talking about it would be the first step to decrease the uncertainty among employees.

6. Conclusions

This chapter presents the conclusions of the study and starts with a background to answering the research question. It continues by first presenting the conclusion for the definition of the concept, what the influencing factors are, and what organisational actions can be used to manage the influencing factors. These sections will then lead on to conclude the chapter by answering the question of what Valcon can do to support employees' ability to be themselves at work as well as a presentation of practical implications and recommendations for Valcon. The chapter ends with a discussion of suggestions for future research.

6.1. Answering the research question

The main research question is following:

What can Valcon do to support the employees' ability to be themselves at work?

In order to answer the main research question, three sub-questions were created:

1. What does being yourself at work mean for the employees?
2. What factors affect the employees' ability to be themselves at work?
3. How can organisations manage the factors affecting the employees' ability to be themselves at work?

Answers to all four questions will be concluded below, where each question has its own section.

6.1.1. Definition

To define what it means to be yourself at work is complex. Based on the findings of this study, it is not possible to state one single definition because of its individual meaning to different persons. What have been found, however, are three different and inter-related subthemes; identity, expressions and relationships. Identity involves not having to enter a specific role at work, but being as you are with your interests and values. Expressions mean having the freedom to say and show what you feel and think about. There should also be space to allow for emotions and feelings to be heard and cared for. While the first two subthemes, as well as previous studies, are more focused on the individual, the relationship subtheme adds a social perspective to the concept. Relationships are a central part in that it provides emotional safety, trust and support. Despite the fact that literature so far has neglected these connections, it can be concluded that relationships play an important part in the definition of the concept of being yourself at work.

Out of the three subthemes identified in empirical findings, identity is most discussed in literature where the concepts of authenticity, holacracy, identity and wholeness touches upon it. The subtheme of expressions can also be found within the concepts of authenticity and holacracy. The subtheme of relationships can only be connected with holacracy, highlighting a major difference between the empirical findings and literature in terms of defining the concept.

6.1.2. Influencing Factors

Four areas of factors affecting the ability to be yourself at work have been found; consulting, individuality, workplace and structures. The group of consulting factors can be interpreted in two ways. On the one hand, it can be argued that it is not factors *per se* but rather characteristics of the industry. On the other hand, since it is argued by both literature and the empirical findings to have an impact on employees' ability to be themselves at work, there is supporting evidence of this being a group of factors. The group of individuality factors found in the empirical findings does not have support in literature. However, since it was discussed by several respondents, it is still considered a group of factors. The latter two groups, workplace and structures, are the groups that were most discussed both in the interviews and in literature.

When looking at the specific factors in the four groups, it is hard to draw conclusions based on a comparison between literature and the empirical findings. Even though factors related to the groups consulting, workplace and structures are mentioned by both literature and the empirical findings, there is discrepancy when looking at it on a more detailed level. What can be concluded, however, is that the context has an impact on the influencing factors, where both the company itself as well as the specific industry may have an impact. Also, it has been shown that the phenomenon, to some extent, is subjective. However, as this study takes on an organisational perspective, individual differences will not be discussed in further detail.

6.1.3. Organisational Actions

The organisational actions which can be used to manage the influencing factors are divided into the four areas matching the influencing factors; consulting, individuality, workplace and structures. Organisational actions related to both workplace and structures were supported by literature as well as by the empirical findings. The actions related to consulting and individual factors were mentioned in the interviews but did not have support from literature. However, as it has been concluded that these two groups should be considered relevant factors, the actions related to these groups should be considered relevant as well. There are no arguments for making a distinction between the groups of factors and the groups of actions. Furthermore, the fact that there is support for this in the empirical findings strengthens the argument that these four groups are relevant for answering the research question.

Even though both literature and the empirical findings mention actions related to workplace and structures, there is discrepancy in terms of the specific actions. Therefore, it can be concluded that actions in these groups are important, but that the specific factors are context dependent. When it comes to consulting, some specific actions are mentioned. There are, however, no specific actions to influence the profession, but the other groups of actions could be seen as mitigating the consulting factor. Also, the profession and industry influence what actions can be undertaken. When it comes to actions related to individuality factors, a person's background, personality or home situation is beyond the control of the organisation. However, as there is a need to adjust the actions to all individuals in the organisation, individuality should be considered when looking at the other groups of actions.

6.1.4. What can Valcon do to support the employees' ability to be themselves at work?

Before putting together the three sub-questions and answering the question of what Valcon can do to support employees' ability to be themselves at work, it must be understood that the concept is both complex and subjective. In other words, it should be pointed out that ideas, values and needs of the employees are individual and differ, and also that the specific context of the organisation affects what the specific influencing factors are and what specific actions that matters. In the context of Valcon, being yourself at work consist of three subthemes; identity, expressions and relationships. The factors that affect these three subthemes are consulting, individuality, workplace and structures, and there are various context-specific organisational actions that can be undertaken to manage these factors. They are all connected and should be considered with regards to one another. The understanding of these connections and the importance of the individual differences are necessary in order to find the appropriate actions to support the employees' ability to be themselves at work.

6.2. Recommendations

When taking this from theory to practice, the main recommendation for Valcon is to be aware of the dynamics of the concept. By understanding the different aspects of the definition as well as the groups of influencing factors and organisational actions, it will be possible for Valcon to break down the topic and make focused evaluations and efforts. As it has been argued that the definition, factors and actions found in this research are connected, it is valuable for Valcon to understand the different cornerstones of the concept. This is especially important since the concept is individual, meaning that what is important for one person might not be important for another person. Therefore, a holistic view of this is necessary in order to create an organisation where all employees are supported to be themselves at work.

Despite the argued differences and individuality in the topic, this study presents a general view among the interviewees and could therefore be used as basis for the understanding of the concept at Valcon. In order for Valcon to support their employees' ability of being themselves at work, they are suggested to create a portfolio of actions covering all aspects of the framework and adjust it to fit their specific context and industry while at the same time taking individual needs into consideration.

For organisations in general, this thesis contributes with three concrete recommendations. Firstly, the framework provides an understanding of the topic and can be used as a guide to the dynamics of the concept. Secondly, organisations should be aware of the impact the context they are operating in has and use the insights in the right context. Thirdly, when going from theory to practice, attention should be directed to the individuality of the employees.

6.3. Future Research

The concept of being yourself at work is still only briefly explored within management literature today. These gaps open up for further exploration and investigation and three suggestions of future research will now be presented.

First, it would be especially interesting to divided the topic and go into further detail of what have been found of the different factors. By investigating each factor separately a deeper understanding of the characteristics within the management consulting industry could potentially be explored.

It would also be interesting to conduct a comparative study looking at different influencing individual factors, such as age, gender or nationality. By examining and comparing the factors certain relevance can be proven or rejected. This study could be designed using a quantitative approach, in order to ease the ability to compare the results, but also to generalise the findings.

The third suggestion of future research would be to examine the conceptual framework of this thesis in another context, by for example looking at a different industry. The other industry could be a completely different one, or one with similar characteristics, such as a knowledge intensive one. Will the factors remain the same, or are new ones to be found?

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Appendix

Appendix A - Interview Guide

Introduction

First of all, thank you for taking your time to participate in our master thesis project!

Introduction to the interview set-up.

Presentation of interviewers.

Do we have your permission to record this interview?

Do you have any questions before we start?

Interview questions

Background

In order to get to know you a little bit better, can you very briefly tell us about your background at Valcon?

Definition

What is your understanding of the concept ‘being yourself at work’?

Do you have any examples from Valcon?

How important is it for you to be yourself at work?

Why is it (not) that important?

In what situations is it more or less important for you to be yourself at work?

Could you elaborate?

In the work as a consultant, how important do you feel that it is to be yourself at work?

Could you please elaborate on the pros and cons of being yourself at work in the management consulting context?

Factors

What are the aspects that could have an impact on your ability to be yourself at work?

Explain how and why?

At a brief level, in what situations do you feel that you can be yourself at work today?

Why is that?

In general, to what extent do you think that people at Valcon feel that they can be themselves at work?

Why do you think so?

Actions

How is Valcon enabling your ability to be yourself at work today?

Do you have any examples?

What can Valcon do in order to further increase employees' ability to be themselves at work?

Could you elaborate/give examples?

Concluding question:

Is there anything you would like to add?

Ending

Thank you for sharing your thoughts with us, your participation is highly valuable. After all interviews are completed, we will summarise and analyse the data at an aggregated level. The findings will be presented in June and we will share the results with you afterwards.

If you have any questions regarding the interview, or if there is something you would like to add, remove or revise, please feel free to reach out to us.

Appendix B - Email of invitation

Hi x,

Besides my work as a JC at Valcon, I am writing my Master Thesis at the School of Business, Economics and Law at the University of Gothenburg. Me and my thesis partner Johanna Edén are looking into how Valcon can support the employees' feeling of being themselves at work. The focus is on what 'being yourself at work' means in a Valcon-context as well as what can be done at an organisational level to further support this feeling among employees.

We have planned to conduct around ten interviews during March, where our ambition is to capture a diversity of people from different parts of the company. We think that your insights would be a great contribution to the study, and we are therefore asking if you would like to participate?

The topics that will be covered are for example:

- What does 'being yourself at work' mean to you?
- What challenges do you see in 'being yourself at work' in a management consulting and/or Valcon context?
- What can Valcon do to further strengthen your feeling of 'being yourself at work'?

We would very much appreciate your contribution, so please let us know if you are interested so that we can schedule an interview.

If you have any questions, feel free to contact us.

Thank you in advance and have a nice day,
Emma & Johanna

Appendix C - Email before the interview

Dear x,

It is soon time for our master thesis interview and we hope you are looking forward to it as much as we do. As previously mentioned, the interview will be about **being yourself at work** and the focus will be on what it means in a Valcon context as well as what can be done at an organisational level to support this feeling among employees.

If you would like to prepare for the interview, we are hereby sending you the questions we will focus on during the interview. However, the interview will be semi-structured, meaning that the questions are flexible and that follow-up questions also may be added. We would also like to remind you that the interview is voluntary and that we don't expect more answers than you feel comfortable with.

We would also like to highlight the fact that the interview will be held in English. People from different nationalities will be interviewed in this study and in order to make the interviews comparable, and thereby following research guidelines, the interview questions will be in English. However, if you feel more comfortable answering in Swedish or Danish, we encourage you to do that.

If you don't mind, we suggest that the interview will be held with both audio and video. We believe this will create a more relaxed interview situation and make the interview more like a small conversation. If this does not work for you or if this would make you feel uncomfortable, please let us know.

More detailed information will be given during the interview but if you have any questions before that, feel free to reach out to us.

Best regards,

Johanna Edén & Emma Åkerlind

Appendix D - Details of interviews

Interviewee	Date	Language	Approach
Respondent A	2019-03-07	English	Video call
Respondent B	2019-03-08	Swedish	Video call
Respondent C	2019-03-11	English	Video call
Respondent D	2019-03-13	English	Video call
Respondent E	2019-03-18	English	Video call
Respondent F	2019-03-18	Swedish	Face-to-Face
Respondent G	2019-03-26	English	Video call
Respondent H	2019-04-01	Danish	Video call

Appendix E - Overview of coding

Theme	Subthemes	Codes
Definition	<i>Identity</i>	<i>No mask/role, alignment, looks, interests, values</i>
	<i>Expressions</i>	<i>Feelings and emotions, integrity, spirituality, vulnerability, opinions, thoughts</i>
	<i>Relationships</i>	<i>Colleagues, boss, conversations, involvement, seeing each person</i>

Theme	Subthemes	Codes
Influencing Factors	<i>Consulting</i>	<i>Expectations, characteristics, tasks, professionalism</i>
	<i>Individuality</i>	<i>Demographics, personality, generation, experience</i>
	<i>Workplace</i>	<i>Colleagues, culture, office</i>
	<i>Structures</i>	<i>Hierarchy, leadership, development, evaluation</i>

Theme	Subthemes	Codes
Organisational Actions	<i>Consulting</i>	<i>Projects, industry</i>
	<i>Individuality</i>	<i>Acceptance, meaning</i>
	<i>Workplace</i>	<i>Culture, relations, workspace</i>
	<i>Structures</i>	<i>HR, leadership, development, processes</i>