



**Where do I belong? Freelancers, between “insiderness” and
“outsiderness”**

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To Isabelle & Jean-Yves

Abstract

In recent decades, non-standard working relationships have seen a significant rise, with independent contractors, commonly referred to as 'freelancers', being particularly prevalent (Katz & Krueger, 2019). Freelancers are self-employed individuals who work independently, often on a project basis, without long-term commitments to a particular employer (Burke, 2015). They market their skills and expertise to multiple clients (Kazi et al., 2014; Burke & Cowling, 2015). Freelancing has become so prevalent for several reasons. On an individual side, many people choose freelancing for the autonomy, flexibility and freedom it offers, driven by a desire for self-actualisation and to avoid hierarchical subordination (Shevchuk et al., 2019; Fleming, 2017; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2010; Norbäck & Styhre, 2019). On the organisational level, freelancers are a preferred workforce due to their specific skills and organisational aptitude, as well as their ability to provide the required technical and creative expertise (Storey et al., 2005; Barley & Kunda, 2004; Burke, 2015). In addition to these characteristics, there is a growing emphasis on matching labour input to business demand (Purcell & Purcell, 1998; Guest, 2004; Weil, 2014). Contracting freelancers can therefore be a strategic decision to achieve these goals.

However, this shift towards freelancing is not without challenges on both sides (Burke, 2015). On the one hand, freelancers frequently face job insecurity, financial instability, and threats to their professional and personal identity (Rowlands & Handy, 2012; Norbäck & Styhre, 2019; Caza et al., 2022); on the other hand, these relationships can lead to tensions if organisations are not familiar with the management of freelancers (Storey et al., 2005; van den Born & van Witteloostuijn, 2013).

As a result, it is not surprising that the particularities of freelance work, combined with the opportunities and challenges this type of working relationship offers, have attracted much attention. Nevertheless, important gaps remain. Firstly, previous research has mostly focussed on lower-skilled and lower-paid freelancers and has not examined freelancing in all its diversity. In addition, previous studies have mainly focused on what freelancers can do for the organisation and have paid less attention to their experiences, although this could provide a tremendous deal of insight. It is therefore important to understand the life experiences of freelancers. Such an understanding can provide valuable insights into how to navigate non-standard working relationships. This knowledge can benefit a wide range of stakeholders, such as organisations, managers, employees, freelancers and policy makers. In other words, these insights can play a pivotal role in developing strategies and policies that enable both freelancers and organisations to thrive in an increasingly dynamic landscape. This dissertation aims to answer several questions to better understand freelancers and capture their life experiences. To understand who they are, I will first examine where they belong: Are freelancers insiders (like employees) or outsiders (like entrepreneurs)? Then I will examine where they develop their sense of belonging (or “insiderness”) and what the antecedents and outcomes of such a sense of belonging are. Finally, as we will see that freelancers experience tensions between insider and outsider characteristics, I will explore how they experience and manage these tensions and what impact they have on their lives in general and their careers in particular.

This dissertation comprises three studies (reported in Chapters 3 to 5) that aim to advance our theoretical and empirical understanding of freelancers’ life experiences, particularly focussing on their sense of belonging. Chapter 3, through qualitative interviews, investigates whether freelancers perceive themselves as insiders within their client organisations. In this chapter, I

reveal that they consistently view themselves as outsiders but can develop an insider status within their client teams, thereby managing both statuses simultaneously through sustainable strategies. Chapter 4 establishes the concept of team-based perceived insider status (perceived insider status at the team level) and explores its antecedents and outcomes through a quantitative study of a diverse pool of freelancers. It shows that freelancers who feel like insiders in their project teams experience enhanced work engagement. Team support, social cohesion, and trust are critical in fostering this team-based perception of insider status. Chapter 5 examines the tensions freelancers experience between their inherent insider and outsider characteristics. It moves the discussion forward, moving from considering them as hybrids to a more dynamic view of those who experience and need to employ approaches to manage these paradoxical tensions. By exploring the life experiences of freelancers through a paradoxical theory lens (e.g., Schad et al., 2016; Putnam et al., 2016), I establish that some approaches lead to an unsustainable freelancing experience (*selection*), while other approaches (*paradoxical thinking* and *third-space*), when combined, not only make the freelancing experience sustainable but also facilitate entrepreneurial experimentation, leading to a potential career as a fully-fledged entrepreneur. This dissertation thus contributes to the literature on freelancers, but also enriches the discourse on various theoretical frameworks such as perceived insider status, psychological contract, paradox theory, and the career literature.

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When I embarked on my PhD journey, I resolved not to compromise. I aspired to balance my career with research and teaching, but I underestimated the mental and time sacrifices that would be required. The commitment that this PhD demanded of me inevitably had an impact on my social life. Nevertheless, some friends, especially Bertrand, Dennis, Renate, Oliver, Adrian and Myriam, became even closer to me—and I am very grateful for their unwavering support. My heartfelt thanks also go to Mathieu, my partner, who has always supported me. The countless early mornings, late evenings and weekends I dedicated to my dissertation were time spent away from you all, and yet you understood the significance of this endeavour and were there for me, even in the most difficult moments.

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agreed on the condition that she had me, and thus I was born into a family where the love of learning and growth was omnipresent. This dissertation is dedicated to my mother, who taught me humility and resilience. She battled cancer for over a decade, and although she lost the battle to the disease, she triumphed in her zest for life and lived to see her children and grandchildren develop to their fullest potential. Despite her suffering, she never complained and always saw the potential in others and encouraged them to be the best version of themselves. She lived to see people thrive and was humbly proud of their development. She also taught me that if you want something, you have to work for it and go for it boldly. She inspired me to not hesitate when it comes to achieving what I want and to fight for my ideals, my career and my work.

This dissertation is for you, Mother.

List of Publications

Parts of this dissertation have been submitted for publication in the following outlets in accordance with the ESCP Business School’s doctoral program guidelines:

No.	Title	Author(s)	Outlet	ABS	Status	Points
I.	Insider to what? A dynamic analysis of freelancers’ perceived insider/outsider status through the lens of the psychological contract	1. Gigant, Thomas 2. Cañibano, Almudena 3. Alfes, Kerstin	Journal: <i>Human Relations</i>	A	R&R	1.33
	Symposium: Reinventing Work. The Implications of Modern Work Arrangement for Individuals and Teams		Proceedings: <i>82nd Annual Meeting of the Academy of Management</i>	–	P	–
II.	Team-Based Perceived Insider Status: Exploring Drives and Outcomes of Freelancers' Sense of Belonging toward their Project Teams	1. Gigant, Thomas 2. Alfes, Kerstin 3. Cañibano, Almudena	Journal: <i>Journal of Vocational Behavior</i>	A	R&R	1.33
III.	The freelancer’s paradox: Mastering the Tightrope Walk Between the Insider’s and the Outsider’s Worlds	1. Gigant, Thomas 2. Cañibano, Almudena 3. Alfes, Kerstin	Journal: <i>Work, Employment and Society</i>	A	U	1.33
	EGOS Conference: European Group for Organizational Studies 2024	1. Gigant, Thomas 2. Cañibano, Almudena 3. Alfes, Kerstin		–	–	–
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Note: U = Under Review (passed desk reject); R&R = Revise and Resubmit; P = Published. ABS = Association of Business Schools.

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List of Abbreviations

BCG	Boston Consulting Group
e.g.	Exempli gratia (Latin: for example)
Et al.	Et alia (Latin: and others)
i.e.	Id est (Latin: that means)
IT	Information Technology
MVP	Minimum Viable Product
p.	Page
PIS	Perceived Insider Status
POS	Perceived Outsider Status

Chapter 1 General Introduction

1.1 Contingent work and freelancing

1.1.1 Contingent work

IN RECENT DECADES, the number of non-standard workers has increased significantly. These non-standard workers, also referred to as ‘contingent’ or ‘alternative’ workers, include four distinct subcategories: (1) temporary help service firms or staffing agencies, such as Adecco, Manpower, and Accutemps; (2) contingent workers engaged through direct-hire or in-house arrangements; (3) individuals employed directly by an organisation for seasonal contracts, as is prevalent in sectors such as hospitality; and (4) the focus of this dissertation, independent contractors or freelancers (Connelly & Gallagher, 2004). Academics and practitioners often use the term ‘gig worker’ in addition to these four subcategories. The ‘gig economy’ is a catch-all category and refers to economic activities or work arrangements related to the performance of very short-term tasks facilitated by digital platforms, including freelance work, temporary work, on-demand work and contract work (Hudek et al., 2021). It is important to note that each subcategory of contingent workers has its own unique characteristics. These characteristics pose a challenge for organisations, which often must manage these different categories of workers alongside traditional employees. To overcome these challenges and optimise the performance of these workers, organisations need to consider the unique characteristics of this diverse workforce and take into account their well-being, engagement and integration into the project teams to ensure the performance and success of their organisations (e.g., Van Dyne & Ang, 1998; Näswall & De Witte, 2003; Connelly & Gallagher, 2004; Kessler & Coyle-Shapiro, 2002). As a result, management

scholars have begun to investigate how non-standard workers perceive their working relationships and how organisations manage their interactions with contingent workers, such as independent contractors (Lemmon et al., 2016). Building on existing research, this dissertation focusses on independent contractors, also known as freelancers.

A rich and varied vocabulary characterises these professional, underscoring the multifaceted nature (Zadik et al., 2019). The terms used range from “temporary independent contract workers” (Burke & Cowling, 2020) and “solo self-employed” to “independent professionals” (Bögenhold et al., 2014) as well as terms such as “own-account workers” (International Labour Office, 2009), “portfolio workers” (Handy, 1985) and “contingent workers” (Lapalme et al., 2009). However, there are as many names for the term freelancer as there are definitions. Although these definitions seem to differ, they all emphasise the essential characteristics attributed to freelancers: These characteristics include autonomy, self-responsibility for work and income, and the absence of traditional employment relationships (Malone & Laubacher 1998; Barley & Kunda 2004; Osnowitz 2010). Kitching and Smallbone (2012) offer a critical perspective by describing freelancers as independent entities engaged in self-directed business activities, further illuminated by additional scholarly definitions and insights into the industry. These descriptions, ranging from the Oxford English Dictionary’s emphasis on the absence of long-term contractual commitments to the focus on the model of self-employment in the digital age (Malt and BCG, 2021), lead to a common understanding of the freelance paradigm. This convergence underscores the independence and autonomy inherent in freelance work, despite the wide range of activities and organisational structures it can encompass. Consequently, the dialogue moves from the broader categorisation of non-standard employment to a nuanced

interrogation of freelancing, highlighting the complexity and varied interpretations that challenge the establishment of a universally accepted definition.

1.1.2 Freelancers' role, diversity and importance

Despite the difficulty of naming or even defining freelancers, they have attracted a lot of attention in the last decade for several reasons. Indeed, freelancers occupy a central role in organisations and societies (a), they represent a very diverse group (b) and occupy an increasingly important place in today's world of work (c).

a. The central role of freelancers. Freelancers serve as an external source of knowledge and skills for organisations and provide them with numerous advantages (Sutherland et al., 2020; Van den Groenendaal et al., 2023; Peters et al., 2020). These include increasing performance and productivity, supporting the implementation of risk mitigation strategies, reducing financial constraints, and promoting competitiveness (Huđek et al., 2020). In addition, freelancers contribute significantly to driving innovation, increasing efficiency, and facilitating market entry, thereby positioning themselves as key players in an innovation-driven and entrepreneurial economy (Huđek et al., 2020; Burke & Cowling, 2015).

b. Freelancing and its diversity. Research on diversity in the freelance world reveals that there are significant differences among freelancers in terms of occupational context, qualifications, and remuneration levels (Shevchuk et al., 2019). Indeed, the freelance workforce is heterogeneous, with a wide range of motivations and preferences. For example, some freelancers value flexibility and work-life balance, while others are primarily motivated by financial benefits (van den Born & Van Witteloostuijn, 2013). Furthermore, the literature emphasises that the prevalence of

freelancing is due not only to limited wage-based employment opportunities but also to improved prospects for successful entrepreneurial activity (Falco & Haywood, 2016).

The differences in income between freelancers (i.e. hourly or daily rates) reflect their skills. Those earning higher incomes tend to have in-demand skills, such as management expertise, and often have a high degree of self-determination as they choose freelancing as their preferred career path (Burke, 2015). Compared to the higher-skilled and better-paid freelancers, the lower-paid freelancers, who are often forced out of necessity, generally have less agency (Jang, 2017). While research has primarily focused on lower-paid and less-skilled workers (who are considered precarious and vulnerable), it can be assumed that higher-skilled and better-paid freelancers experience freelancing differently, with its unique benefits and challenges (Burke, 2015). Focusing on just one category of freelancer therefore does not capture the full breadth of the freelance market. Essentially, it can be said that varying circumstances within freelancing lead to differing levels of agency and different outcomes in terms of experiences with freelancing and life and career trajectories.

c. The growing size of the freelancing category. The freelance workforce is thriving and makes up a significant and growing part of the global workforce. For example, the “Freelancing in America” study published by Upwork (2022) predicts that freelancers could make up 50% of the US workforce by 2027. This trend extends globally, with the freelance economy expected to reach \$455.2 billion by 2023 (Statista, 2019), underlining the significant economic contribution of freelancers and reflecting a fundamental shift in working patterns. Given the significant role, diversity and increasing presence of freelancers in the workforce, further research on this group is essential. Although numerous studies have already been conducted on freelancers, shedding light

on various aspects of this type of work and their contributions, several research gaps remain. Before addressing these gaps, let us first examine the existing literature.

1.2 The state of research on freelancers

1.2.1 The general state of the research and the focus on the manager's perspective

Research on freelancing has explored a wide range of dimensions, with a focus on learning and innovation in project-based organisations. Studies such as those by Prencipe and Tell (2001) or Brady and Davies (2004) offer insights into the ways in which learning processes unfold in such environments, while Keegan and Turner (2002) examine the interplay between innovation and project management practises. Burke and Cowling (2015) emphasise that freelancers help to foster entrepreneurship in organisations and improve risk management in uncertain business contexts. Overall, these studies highlight the significant value that freelancers offer, particularly in promoting organisational agility, flexibility and innovation.

Recently, a growing body of research has begun to shed light on the experiences of freelancers from an individual perspective (i.e., the life experiences of freelancers), including their career development (e.g., Barlage et al., 2023; Van den Born & Van Witteloostuijn, 2013; Fraser & Gold, 2001). However, most of the literature to date has focused on the demand for these workers from an organisational perspective. For example, studies have examined the development of organisational learning or capabilities in environments where traditional employment is the primary focus (e.g., Kitching & Smallbone, 2012; Lo Presti et al., 2018; Mondon-Navazo et al., 2022). These studies also focus on how freelancers can deliver positive outcomes for organisations. In doing so, these studies often overlook the experiences of freelancers and the wider implications of contingent work. This idea is illustrated by Kunda et al. (2002) when the authors stated that

“this literature takes the firm’s perspective, it focuses more or less exclusively on the demand for contractors and ignores both the contractors’ experience and the significance of contracting as an employment relationship” (Kunda et al., 2002, p. 235). This emphasis has led to a significant gap in empirical studies examining freelancing from the perspective of freelancers, which limits our understanding of their experiences, and the complexities associated with freelancing (e.g., Shevchuk et al., 2019; Blaising et al., 2020).

1.2.2 The focus on low-skilled freelancers

Freelancers are a diverse and heterogeneous group, yet much of the research to date has focussed on low-skilled, low-paid freelancers, often referred to as gig workers. This has led to their challenges, such as financial insecurity, irregular working hours, and their sense of insecurity, being overemphasised (e.g., Blaising et al., 2020; Norbäck & Styhre, 2019; Shevchuk & Strebkov, 2015). Previous research shows that these freelancers often suffer from demeaning work, limited control over their working conditions and difficulties in securing stable projects, leading to fears of unemployment due to lack of contracts (Rowlands & Handy, 2012).

While these findings are valuable, the overwhelming focus on lower-skilled workers has led to a skewed understanding of freelancing. In fact, these findings overlook the experiences of highly skilled freelancers. Despite being labelled as freelancers, these individuals have distinctive characteristics; they receive substantial compensation and occupy a pivotal position in the freelance workforce in sectors such as IT, creative industries, management and technology. Recent research, such as that by Gussek and Wiesche (2022), shows that highly skilled freelancers, for example in the IT industry, are constantly updating their skills to remain competitive and that they base their success on factors such as reputation, education and a broad range of skills. Studies also

show that challenging tasks and positive workplace relationships influence their commitment to client organisations, which is generally lower than that of permanent employees (Süß & Kleiner, 2007).

Therefore, despite some existing research, there is still a significant gap in understanding highly skilled freelancers. Studies should examine the full diversity of freelancers' experiences, including motivations, challenges and career trajectories at all skill levels. Such studies could help us develop a comprehensive understanding of contingent workers in general and freelancers in particular that better reflects the reality of freelancers.

1.2.3 Freelancers as hybrids

When researching freelancers, one question takes centre stage: who are they? Answering this question is a challenge, as evidenced by the variety of terms used to describe this group of workers. To understand who they are, studies have examined the roles they play in the world of work. At the centre of this research is the question of whether freelancers should be considered insiders, similar to employees, or outsiders, similar to entrepreneurs. This research approach has led to freelancers being categorised as ‘hybrids’ of employees and entrepreneurs (Van den Born & Van Witteloostuijn, 2013) or as dependent and independent workers (Murgia & Pulignano, 2021). This follows the logic that freelancers, similar to employees, often build close and lasting relationships with their clients. However, unlike employees, freelancers engage in organisations only temporarily and assume personal risks and rewards without the support structures normally available to employees (Van den Born & Van Witteloostuijn, 2013; Murgia & Pulignano, 2021).

Although understanding these tensions offers insight into the experience of freelancing, this hybrid approach has its limitations when it comes to fully unpacking the inherent tensions that

characterise the existence of freelancers. Let's take a closer look at the concept of hybridity: Similar to biology, a hybrid being typically possesses a stable set of characteristics from both parents. Applying this concept to freelancers suggests a static view in which the characteristics of employees and entrepreneurs merge into a coherent, stable entity. However, this view overlooks the dynamic interplay between insider and outsider characteristics and the constant tensions that freelancers experience – tensions that are also depicted in existing research (Petriglieri et al., 2019; Shevchuk et al., 2019; Blaising et al., 2020). Furthermore, viewing freelancers as hybrids of employees and entrepreneurs can obscure the unique challenges they face. This perspective risks applying solutions that work for employees or entrepreneurs but are not tailored to the unique needs of freelancers, thus ignoring more appropriate and better-adapted solutions. Furthermore, this view can perpetuate stereotypes, such as the idea that freelancers are merely 'wannabe' entrepreneurs who lack the ambition or skills to start their own business. Such stereotypes can be damaging and discourage potential freelancers from pursuing this career path.

1.3 Aim of the dissertation

1.3.1 Toward understanding freelancers in its diversity

By focussing on IT freelancers, this dissertation aims to enhance our understanding of freelancing by moving beyond a monolithic view and exploring the multifaceted nature of freelancing across different industries, skills, motivations and forms of work. IT freelancers are a growing subset of freelancers, becoming increasingly important in today's world of work. IT freelancers represent the opposite of the gig workers traditionally represented in the literature; they possess skills that are in high demand in the market and require higher remuneration (i.e., higher rates), resulting in different characteristics and consequently different life experiences. By doing

so, this work responds to the call for empirical studies that expand knowledge about freelancing and the experiences of freelancers in their diversity (Norbäck & Styhre, 2019; Lo Presti et al., 2018).

Recognising the diversity within freelancing is essential to avoid generalisations and provides a basis for tailored policy decisions and support mechanisms. Understanding these differences enables the development of targeted solutions to ensure that freelancers receive appropriate support and protection, rather than relying on one-size-fits-all approaches. Furthermore, the study of freelancers' diverse experiences aims to identify trends and patterns that could help predict future developments in the freelance economy. The insights from such analyses are invaluable for anticipating change and preparing for future challenges and opportunities. In addition, these insights highlight the unique contributions of freelancers to the economy and society, helping to combat negative stereotypes and promote a positive image of freelancing.

As a result, this dissertation consists of two qualitative studies focusing on IT freelancers working for the German market and one quantitative study involving participants from a broader group of freelancers (from different industries and three countries, namely the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand). With this approach, I want to identify both similarities and differences between freelancers to better understand their lived experience and, thus, the definition of what they are.

1.3.2 From the manager's to the freelancer's perspective: Freelancer's life experience –

Uncovering the human element

In this dissertation, the perspective is shifted from the manager and the organisation to the freelancer to emphasise the human element of freelancing, or in other words, the lived experience

of freelancers. As mentioned earlier, current research often emphasises the economic and operational aspects of freelancing, such as the cost savings they can represent, the flexibility or project management support, to name but a few (e.g., Storey et al., 2005; Osnowitz, 2010; Burke, 2015). This focus on organisations, or more specifically, on what freelancers can bring to the organisation, is a common theme in human resource management and organisational behaviour research but is particularly evident in the case of research on freelancers, as they benefit from relatively fewer publications than other groups of workers (namely employees). As a result, the full spectrum of freelancers' experiences remains largely unexplored. However, by focussing on the freelancers' perspective, we can gain a wide range of meaningful insights, e.g., on their motivations, challenges and rewards, and gain insights into the emotional, psychological and social aspects of freelancing (e.g., Damian & Capatina, 2019).

Let's focus on their motivations, for example. Freelancers are driven by various motivations, such as the need for flexibility, autonomy and self-fulfilment (Mondon-Navazo et al., 2022; Malt & BCG, 2021). However, they also face challenges in the form of income volatility, lack of social benefits and social isolation, to name a few (e.g., Gupta et al., 2020; Toth et al., 2020). Despite some similarities, these motivations and challenges differ significantly from those of traditional employees and therefore require a nuanced understanding to develop effective management approaches, strategies and support mechanisms (Lo Presti et al., 2018). Addressing these needs may lead to a more inclusive and empathetic framework for supporting freelancers, as well as organisations and their leaders, in their interactions with this category of workers.

1.3.3 Reframing the freelancer's sense of belonging

Freelancers are often perceived as either external employees, entrepreneurs, or a hybrid of both, which challenges the traditional insider-outsider dichotomy (Burke & Cowling, 2015; Damian & Manea, 2019; Hudek et al., 2020). Despite being seen as outsiders, freelancers frequently cultivate close relationships with their teams and stakeholders (e.g., Van den Born & Van Witteloostuijn, 2013). This complexity stems from their unique position, in which they transcend established employment categories and challenge existing conceptual frameworks.

To fully understand the experiences of freelancers, we need to rethink their sense of belonging and move beyond traditional notions of insider and outsider status. By examining who freelancers feel connected to or excluded from – whether clients, employees of client organisations, project teams or other freelancers – we can clarify the dynamics of their professional relationships. To reframe the notion of belonging in freelancing, it is necessary to rethink the notion of hybridity, especially considering the ongoing tensions that freelancers face. This perspective allows us to gain a more nuanced understanding of their lived experiences. Such an approach could provide a more dynamic view of the characteristics traditionally associated with either the role of an insider (similar to an employee) or an entrepreneur. It could also provide deeper insights into the ways in which freelancers manage the tensions between these opposing characteristics, as well as the implications of such management. A focus on freelancers' self-definition and perceived sense of belonging (“insiderness”) can unravel the complexity of their identity and emphasise their integral role in the modern workplace. This challenges the traditional notion of freelancers as mere outsiders and provides a more comprehensive understanding of freelancing as a dynamic and multifaceted form of employment. In other words, redefining freelancers' sense of belonging requires moving beyond traditional notions of insiders and outsiders and recognising their complex

experiences. Understanding the antecedents and outcomes of their “insiderness” (and “outsiderness”) is an essential prerequisite for developing strategies to promote their well-being, career progression, and social integration, ultimately fostering a more inclusive and cohesive freelance ecosystem. This brings us to the theoretical foundations of my dissertation. I will commence by providing a concise overview of belonging and its implications. Next, I will select perceived insider status as a dimension of belonging, which will subsequently inform the three research projects that follow. In addition, I will discuss the use of paradox theory to observe the tensions that freelancers experience and the strategies they employ to manage them.

Chapter 2 Theoretical Underpinnings

2.1 Freelancer sense of belonging and perceived insider status

BUILDING AND MAINTAINING lasting, positive and meaningful interpersonal relationships is a fundamental human design (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Building these relationships fulfils our basic need for acceptance as a member of a group, be it a family, a sports team or an organisation. Baumeister and Leary (1995) argue that belonging is such a fundamental motivation that its absence has serious consequences for us. It is therefore not surprising that understanding the mechanisms and outcomes of belonging has attracted much attention over the years.

Perceived insider status, one of the dimensions of belonging (Knapp et al., 2014; Stamper and Masterson, 2002), has attracted considerable attention in recent years. Perceived insider status is defined as the extent to which an employee perceives him/herself as an organisational insider (Stamper and Masterson, 2002). When employees perceive themselves in this way, they feel that they make an important and valuable contribution, are valued by their colleagues and belong to the organisation's inner circle; in other words, they feel that they belong. As Lapalme et al. (2009) stated, the distinction between insiders and outsiders is essential for defining community boundaries, treating insiders and outsiders as mutually exclusive and contradictory concepts (Chen et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2017). What makes the concept of perceived insider status particularly interesting is the idea of perception itself. Specifically, perceived insider status is distinct from objective indicators of belonging, such as type of employment contract, tenure, or number of hours worked, and is considered the opposite of an outsider. Therefore, perceived insider status could be

seen as an ideal concept for analysing the sense of belonging among workers who are not in a traditional employment relationship.

Research has shown that the concept of perceived insider status has a strong influence on employees' work performance and organisational citizenship behaviour (Dai & Chen, 2015). For example, studies have demonstrated a positive influence on job performance, organisational citizenship behaviour and work engagement (e.g., Lapalme et al., 2009; Wang & Kim, 2013). In addition, research indicates a positive influence between perceived insider status and job satisfaction as well as the intention to stay with an organisation (Raub, 2018). The literature has also examined the antecedents of perceived insider status, with studies suggesting that factors such as actual inclusion, perceived organisational support and employment status are positively associated with perceived insider status (e.g., Wang & Kim, 2013; Hui et al., 2015). Researchers have also examined the relationship between diversity-enhancing practises and perceived insider status, highlighting the importance of organisational fairness and leader-member exchange as antecedents of perceived insider status (Guerrero et al., 2013). Studies have found that perceived insider status influences employees' work attitudes and work behaviour, with a positive correlation found with helpful behaviour and a negative correlation with deviant behaviour (Chen & Aryee, 2007; Wang & Kim, 2013). It has also been associated with greater job satisfaction, greater commitment to the organisation and higher work engagement (Chen & Aryee, 2007; Lapalme et al., 2009; Knapp et al., 2014). However, there are still gaps, which are highlighted below.

2.2 Limitations and opportunities

2.2.1 Leaving the limitations of traditional employment: PIS in the context of freelancing

A primary concern, already highlighted earlier in this dissertation, is the paucity of studies on contingent workers. Of course, the discussion of freelancers' (or more broadly, contingent workers') sense of belonging reflects this lack of research. This lack of research studies is all the more surprising as the concept of perceived insider status could be seen as an ideal construct that allows for the observation of the insider status of contingent workers by capturing their sense of belonging regardless of their contractual arrangement. The use of this concept is particularly relevant in modern work environments where freelancers are increasingly embedded in the operational and social fabric of organisations and examining their 'lived experience' in terms of perceived insider status can open up a rich field of enquiry that transcends conventional organisational boundaries to include interactions with a wider network of actors, offering a complex and dynamic view of belonging.

Initial findings by Stamper and Masterson (2002) suggest that the perception of 'belonging' (or "being an insider") is more dependent on how employees are treated by the organisation than on their actual inclusion (Stamper & Masterson, 2002). Organisations can change this perception by adjusting the level of support provided to employees. This can be done by implementing fair procedures and practises. In this sense, perceived insider status can mediate the relationship between perceived organisational support (POS) and outcomes. Contrary to Pfeffer and Baron's (1988) and Rousseau's (1995) assertions that externalised workers inherently view themselves as outsiders, Lapalme et al.'s (2009) research findings suggest that agency workers, a subset of externalised workers, may experience perceived insider status, demonstrate affective commitment to the client organisation and may facilitate interpersonal relationships with coworkers.

Significantly, support from supervisors and permanent workers within the client organisation can have a significant impact on agency workers' perceptions of insider status, highlighting how treatment by organisational representatives affects those who are only peripherally connected to the organisation.

Research on the concept of perceived insider status has mainly been conducted in the context of traditional employment relationships. However, the differences in freelance work compared to traditional employees call into question its emergence. On the one hand, freelancers are unlikely to develop PIS towards their clients due to their transient commitment and their quest for autonomy and flexibility. On the other hand, their contractual assignments necessitate them to engage intensively with their clients' actors (managers, teams or other subgroups) and operational processes, from which a sense of belonging might emerge. In this sense, it is possible that their external status coexists with a parallel insider experience.

2.2.2 PIS as a mono-focal construct

Since its inception, the concept of perceived insider status has mainly been researched from a singular perspective, i.e., the perceived insider status of traditional employees in traditional organisations (e.g., Dai & Chen, 2015). Most researchers have approached the topic from an organisational perspective, often neglecting the role of individuals in seeking and dealing with insider status, which could be described as the organisation's perceived insider status (later referred to as organisation-based perceived insider status). Furthermore, most studies have used quantitative methods, missing the opportunity to enrich the conceptual understanding of the experience of "insiderness" through qualitative research (Knapp et al., 2014; Raub, 2018; Kim et al., 2019). These limitations oversimplify the complexity of organisational belonging and insider

status. In addition, there is a significant research gap regarding how employees themselves perceive, cultivate and maintain insider status. This perspective is particularly important for understanding the dynamics of contingent work and the development of inclusive organisational policies.

In summary, expanding the lens through which PIS is examined to include contingent workers' experiences offers a more nuanced understanding of belonging in modern work environments. Acknowledging the multi-layered nature of organisational relationships and the diverse perspectives within these relationships paves the way for the development of more inclusive and supportive workplace cultures. This approach is not only consistent with scientific rigour, but also provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the complex interplay between individual perceptions and organisational practices.

2.3 The tensions between “insiderness” and “outsiderness”

2.3.1 Observing the tensions from a paradoxical theory lens

Freelancers occupy a unique position between insider status, akin to employees, and outsider status, akin to entrepreneurs, and embody traits of both categories (Van den Born & Van Witteloostuijn, 2013). They navigate the demands of these two roles and experience a constant interplay of insider and outsider characteristics. While these tensions can be challenging, they also reinforce the unique strengths of freelancers. Freelancers work closely with organisational teams on projects while also collaborating closely with other freelancers, entrepreneurs and external networks (Bouncken et al., 2020). This multifaceted engagement not only enhances their professionalism, but also contributes significantly to economic performance and innovation (Bouncken et al., 2020; Lo Presti et al., 2018; Gupta et al., 2020; Van den Groenendaal et al., 2023;

Jang, 2017). These interactions allow freelancers to integrate diverse perspectives and learnings (Sutherland et al., 2020; Gupta et al., 2020), but also lead to tensions such as autonomy versus precarity and dependence versus independence (Gold & Mustafa, 2013). This emphasises that freelancers experience dynamic tensions rather than occupying a static hybrid state.

Consequently, I argue that a more nuanced understanding of the lived experience of freelancers can be gained by considering insider and outsider characteristics as two sides of paradoxical tensions that represent “cognitively or socially constructed polarities that conceal the simultaneity of conflicting truths” (Lewis, 2000, p. 761). This alternative perspective, grounded in paradox theory, transcends the traditional concept of hybridity and offers a dynamic view of freelancers. Adopting a paradox perspective is key for two reasons. First, it allows us to observe how freelancers continuously manoeuvre through and manage the interplay between opposing yet interrelated elements over time (Smith & Lewis, 2011), which contrasts sharply with the static view offered by the hybridity framework. Second, this perspective sheds light on the strategies that freelancers use to deal with these inherent tensions, which can have a significant impact on various aspects of their professional lives. Evidence from other populations, such as employees, suggests that these tensions are likely to influence freelancers’ performance (Bömelburg et al., 2020), innovation and creativity (Liu et al., 2020), and adaptive decision-making (Smith, 2014). Effectively managing these tensions therefore improves role management and potentially enables freelancers to thrive and develop in their careers.

2.3.2 The state of the research

Paradox is defined as “contradictory yet interrelated – or interdependent (Schad et al., 2016) – elements that exist simultaneously and persist over time” (Smith & Lewis, 2011, p. 386).

This concept has gained prominence in the strategic management literature, where paradox theory has been applied to the study of innovation processes, top management teams and various organisational phenomena (Schad et al., 2016; Putnam et al., 2016). The study of paradoxes has been approached from a variety of metatheoretical traditions, including process-oriented systems, structuration, critical, postmodern, and relational dialectics theories (Putnam et al., 2016). This diversity has led to the development of a typology of alternative ways to respond to and embrace organisational tensions, thereby expanding on traditional approaches (Putnam et al., 2016).

In examining the intersection between paradox theory and career literature, key paradoxes in career development include the belonging vs. distinction paradox, which refers to the tension between an individual's need to belong to multiple subgroups and their desire for individual distinction within those groups (Han & Hovav, 2019). This highlights the challenge of balancing a sense of belonging with the pursuit of personal uniqueness and identity. The old vs. new paradox involves the tension between adhering to traditional practices and embracing innovative strategies for career advancement. Individuals often struggle to decide whether to stick with familiar methods or adopt new, potentially more effective approaches to progress in their careers. The exploration vs. exploitation paradox involves balancing the need to explore new opportunities with leveraging existing resources and knowledge (Lannon & Walsh, 2020). This emphasises the delicate balance between seeking novel experiences and utilising current skills for career growth. The application of paradox theory in these areas provides a nuanced understanding of how individuals and organisations can navigate and manage these inherent tensions effectively.

2.3.3 Limitations and opportunities

2.3.3.1 Paradox theory at an individual level

Similar to the earlier discussions on freelancing and perceived insider status, research on paradoxes has primarily focused on the organisational rather than the individual level (Branicki et al., 2022; Jarzabkowski et al., 2013, Jarzabkowski et al., 2019). Despite paradoxes existing at both levels, much of the scholarly attention, whether implicit or explicit, has focused on examining the tensions and contradictions faced by organisations and their leaders (Branicki et al., 2022). Even as the field of organisational theory continues to evolve with new insights and challenges to traditional concepts, individual-level analyses remain understudied (Andriopoulos & Gotsi, 2017).

Nevertheless, a nascent field of research has begun to explore paradoxes at the micro-level. For example, Han and Hovav (2019) examined how paradoxical tensions influence individual behaviour in knowledge sharing, whereas Jay (2013) investigated the importance of sensemaking and ambiguity in navigating paradoxes in hybrid organisations. Liu et al. (2020) extended these observations by examining the influence of paradoxical mindsets on innovative work behaviour using a multilevel model grounded in self-determination theory. More recent developments include Birkelund's (2022) framework, which outlines three levels of individual responses to paradoxes and extends paradox theory to broader levels of analysis. Complementing this work, Jun (2022) has enhanced our understanding of paradoxes at the micro-level by demonstrating how paradoxical thinking promotes unlearning in the workplace and offers insights into how to manage associated tensions.

Given the predominant focus on organisational-level paradoxes, there is a significant opportunity to expand this literature by exploring paradox theory at the individual level. Understanding how individuals move through and manage paradoxical tensions in their life

experiences can provide valuable insights into their behaviours and strategies, potentially enhancing the applicability of paradox theory beyond organisational contexts. This study aims to fill this gap by examining paradox theory beyond the organisational level, thus expanding the current literature and offering a more comprehensive understanding of paradoxes in various facets of life.

2.3.3.2 Paradox theory management of tensions and consequences

Considering these inherent tensions through paradox theory sheds light the strategies that freelancers employ to manage challenges in their professional lives. Research on employee populations suggests that such tensions significantly influence performance (Bömelburg et al., 2020), innovation and creativity (Liu et al., 2020) and adaptive decision-making capabilities (Smith, 2014). Various frameworks for understanding approaches to navigating paradoxes are presented in the literature (Jarzabkowski & Lê, 2017; Lewis, 2000). For example, the Paradox System Framework (Smith & Lewis, 2022) proposes four categories of approaches to navigating a paradox, namely assumptions, boundaries, comfort and dynamics, while Putnam et al. (2016) categorise them into three categories '*either-or*', '*both-and*', and '*more-than*'. This dissertation will adopt the second categorisation, widely used in the literature, to explore the paradoxical tensions experienced by freelancers and their management strategies. This approach will also highlight the consequences that these tensions and the strategies chosen to manage them can have on freelancers' career trajectories. By understanding and applying these strategies, freelancers can better manage the challenges they face, leading to greater sustainability and growth in their careers.

Purpose and structure of the dissertation

THE ABOVE LITERATURE REVIEW highlights several shortcomings in the literature on contingent work in relation to the life experiences, sense of belonging and career development of freelancers, each of which arises from the inherent tensions between insiders and outsiders that define their role. The aim of this dissertation is therefore to improve understanding of freelancers' life experiences, their sense of belonging based on perceived insider status, the development of this belonging and its potential impact on their behaviour and career trajectory.

Specifically, this dissertation aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the experiences of freelancers, focusing on their sense of belonging. Within this framework, the dissertation aims to achieve three main objectives: to (1) better understand whether freelancers perceive themselves as insiders or outsiders within their organisation, and if they identify as insiders, to determine which specific group they belong to or, alternatively, to explore the reasons for remaining an outsider using the concept of perceived insider status, (2) explore the antecedents and consequences of freelancers' insider status in relation to their client organisation or specific subgroups within that organisation and (3) develop a deeper understanding of the tensions freelancers experience between their insider and outsider characteristics, how they deal with these tensions and what consequences develop as a result thereof. This dissertation is divided into three individual studies, each of which is presented in Chapters 3 to 5.

In Chapter 3, I answer the following questions: *Do freelancers consider themselves insiders in relation to their client organisation?* And how does perceive insider status emerge and evolve for this growing segment of the workforce? This qualitative interview study explores the lived experiences of freelancers to gain insights into the processes that lead to the development of perceived insider status over time. Using the psychological contract as a theoretical framework, I

make three contributions. First, I establish that perceived insider status is not a static concept but a continuous and unfolding process in which the experiences of psychological contract breaches and over-fulfilment are central events. Second, I show that freelancers may experience perceived insider status in relation to specific project teams but insist on remaining as outsiders in their client organisations. Third, I show how the experience of dual insider/outsider status can lead to tensions that freelancers must manage through emotional, physical and rhetorical mechanisms.

In Chapter 4, I take a transformative perspective on freelance work and challenge the conventional outsider paradigm by examining the dynamics of perceived team support, social cohesion and trust in teams. Drawing on social identity theory and social exchange theory, this chapter introduces the concept of ‘team-based perceived insider status’, which illustrates how freelancers’ sense of belonging develops within their respective project teams. I argue that team-based perceived insider status not only redefines their role within teams, but also significantly increases their overall work engagement. My study includes 229 freelancers in different roles and global contexts and highlights the central role of team dynamics in shaping their sense of belonging. By focusing on team-based perceived insider status, I show how they are moving from being perceived as peripheral participants to integral team members. This development challenges the traditional view of freelancers as distanced outsiders and instead emphasises their active integration and contribution within project-oriented organisational structures. The findings highlight the importance of creating a supportive and collaborative team environment to encourage freelancer engagement. This paradigm shift has profound implications for human resource management leaders, challenging them to re-evaluate traditional models and develop strategies that foster inclusive team cultures. In this way, companies can optimise the valuable contributions

made by freelancers and thereby improve project outcomes and organisational efficiency in modern work environments.

In Chapter 5, I investigate the paradoxical tensions inherent in freelance work, challenging the conventional view of freelancers as hybrids between employees (akin to insiders) and entrepreneurs (akin to outsiders). I employ paradox theory as a theoretical lens to explore the tensions between the insider and outsider characteristics experienced by freelancers. By doing so, I examine how freelancers navigate these paradoxical tensions, the strategies they employ, and the impact these strategies have on their careers as freelancers. My study analyses interview data from 36 participants over two waves (2021–2023) to highlight the different tensions experienced between insider and outsider characteristics. This analysis reveals approaches that make freelancing an unsustainable experience, such as *selection* – an *either-or* approach – and those that make freelancing sustainable and even open the door to entrepreneurial experimentation, such as *paradoxical thinking* – a *both-and* approach –, combined with a *third space*, – a *more-than* approach.

By highlighting these dynamics, I underscore the importance of effectively managing paradoxical tensions for freelancers to thrive. This approach not only redefines their role within project teams, but it also enhances their ability to contribute effectively to organisational structures, thus offering insights crucial for encouraging a supportive and productive freelance environment.

In Chapter 6, I conclude this dissertation with a general discussion and integration of the main findings and implications of the three manuscripts and suggest avenues for future theoretical development and empirical investigation. Table 2-1 provides an overview of the three manuscripts in this dissertation.

Table 2-1 Overview of the three manuscripts

	Manuscript 1	Manuscript 2	Manuscript 3
Title	Insider to What? A Dynamic Analysis of Freelancers' Perceived Insider/Outsider Status Through the Lens of the Psychological Contract	Team-Based Perceived Insider Status: Exploring the Drivers and Outcomes of Freelancers' Sense of Belonging to their Project Teams	The Freelancer's Paradox: Mastering the Tightrope Walk Between the Insider's and the Outsider's Worlds
Research Question	How – and towards whom – does perceived insider status emerge and develop over time for freelancers?	Do freelancers develop a perceived insider status? If so, what fosters this status, and how does this status influence their attitudes in the workplace?	How do freelancers experience and manage the inherent tensions between insiderness and outsiderness? How does their approach to managing these tensions influence their career trajectories?
Sample(s)	36 – 1 wave	229	36 – 2 waves
Method	Qualitative	Quantitative	Qualitative
Theoretical perspective	Perceived Insider Status & Psychological contract	Social Exchange Theory & Social Identity Theory	Paradox theory & Career

Chapter 3 Manuscript 1

Title:	Insider to What? A Dynamic Analysis of Freelancers' Perceived Insider/Outsider Status Through the Lens of the Psychological Contract
Authors:	Thomas Gigant, Almudena Cañibano and Kerstin Alfes
Status:	Revise and Resubmit
Conference Proceeding:	<i>82nd Annual Meeting of the Academy of Management</i>
Journal:	<i>Human Relations</i>
Journal Ranking:	A (Chartered ABS Journal Guide 2018)

Manuscript is available from thesis author upon request.

Chapter 4 Manuscript 2

Title:	Team-Based Perceived Insider Status: Exploring Drives and Outcomes of Freelancers' Sense of Belonging toward their Project Teams
Authors:	Thomas Gigant, Kerstin Alfes and Almudena Cañibano
Status:	Revise and Resubmit
Conference Proceeding:	none
Journal:	<i>Journal of Vocational Behavior</i>
Journal Ranking:	A (Chartered ABS Journal Guide 2018)

Manuscript is available from thesis author upon request.

Chapter 5 Manuscript 3

Title:	The freelancer's paradox: Mastering the Tightrope Walk Between the Insider's and the Outsider's Worlds
Authors:	Thomas Gigant, Almudena Cañibano and Kerstin Alfes
Status:	Under Review
Conference Proceeding:	none
Journal:	<i>Work, Employment and Society</i>
Journal Ranking:	A (Chartered ABS Journal Guide 2018)

Manuscript is available from thesis author upon request.

Chapter 6 General Discussion

6.1 Summary and key findings

THIS DISSERTATION CONTRIBUTES to the understanding of freelancing by looking at the lived experiences of freelancers, focussing on the specific group of IT freelancers. It explores their sense of belonging, as well as the paradoxical tensions they experience, to provide a comprehensive and nuanced view of freelancing. This dissertation's contributions fall into three main categories: integrating perceived insider status into the literature on contingent work, exploring the paradoxical tensions and their implications, and the general contributions to the literature on career development in the context of freelancing. A summary of the finding can be found in Figure 6-1.

6.1.1 Integrating perceived insider status into the contingent work literature

In this dissertation, I have introduced the concept of perceived insider status into the project work literature and demonstrated how freelancers can develop a sense of perceived insider status within their project teams while remaining outsiders to their client organisations. Thus, I introduce the concept of team-based perceived insider status and demonstrate how it can be experienced not only by IT freelancers but also by a diverse group of freelancers across various functions, age groups, and countries.

This work also responds to the call by Lapalme et al. (2009) to investigate perceived insider status among various agents within organisations. To date, Liu et al. (2014) are the only researchers who have extended the concept of perceived insider status to other agents by introducing the

concept of leader-based perceived insider status, which refers to the extent to which an individual employee perceives himself or herself as an insider in relation to his or her supervisor (Liu et al., 2014). By developing the concept of team-based perceived insider status, this dissertation enriches the literature on perceived insider status originally introduced by Stamper and Masterson (2002) and further promotes its multifocal aspect. Furthermore, this dissertation explores the antecedents and outcomes of team-based perceived insider status, suggesting that perceived team support, social cohesion, and trust within the team positively influence freelancers' perceived insider status within the team. Team-based perceived insider status highlights the importance of team dynamics in transitioning freelancers from peripheral participants to integral team members. This strengthens their work engagement, underscoring the significance of a supportive team environment for the integration and success of freelancers (Lapalme et al., 2009).

6.1.2 Examining paradoxical tensions and their implications

In this dissertation, I have explored the inherent paradoxical tensions that freelancers face between outsider and insider characteristics, in particular the paradoxical tensions between autonomy and collaboration, independence and dependence, external affiliation and internal belonging, and risk-taking and security. Identifying these paradoxical tensions and the underlying paradox of insider-outsider characteristics enabled me to develop an understanding of how these paradoxical tensions are managed and to shed light on the strategies employed by the participants and the consequences of these strategies for their life experiences in general and their careers in particular. By using paradox theory as a theoretical lens, this dissertation aims to move beyond the conventional notion of hybridity to create a more nuanced understanding of how freelancers continuously navigate and manage “persistent contradictions between interdependent elements”

(Schad et al., 2016, p. 6). Adopting such a theoretical lens is important, as dealing effectively with these paradoxical tensions can improve role management, which in turn impacts performance, innovation, creativity and adaptive decision-making.

More specifically, this dissertation highlights that *selection*, an *either-or* approach to managing paradoxical tensions, can lead to an unsustainable experience of freelancing, potentially resulting in a return to traditional employment. In contrast, approaches such as paradoxical thinking (a *both-and* approach) and third space (a *more-than* approach), when combined, can improve freelancers' role management and enable them to sustain and succeed in their careers. Moreover, it can be observed that the stable experience of freelancing resulting from managing the paradoxical tensions enabled the participant to engage in what we have termed entrepreneurial experimentation (developing new products or services with the aim of building a business with their own employees). Interestingly, while experimenting with entrepreneurial projects, the participants still considered themselves freelancers and freelancing remained their main activity. This dissertation has thus shown how freelancers deal with contradictory elements and apply strategies that have the potential to bridge the gap between freelancing and entrepreneurship.

6.1.3 Contributions to the career development literature

Through these three research projects, this dissertation offers a variety of insights into the literature on freelancing, perceived insider status and careers. First, it offers an in-depth perspective on the transition to freelancing by theorising psychological contract breaches as a crucial mechanism in this process. While not all freelancers observed experienced a psychological contract breach leading to freelancing, those who did not initially experience a contract breach often faced one during one of their first projects. Intertwined with a transactional psychological

contract, psychological contract breach has a transference effect on subsequent projects. In addition to the role of psychological contract and psychological contract breaches, this dissertation integrates perceived insider status into the literature on psychological contract theory. The analysis examines how freelancers deal with their role as insiders and outsiders (or, in other words, with the characteristics associated with their role). This approach reveals the complex and intricate dynamics they face while simultaneously improving theoretical understanding and providing numerous practical insights for managing freelance relationships.

Furthermore, this dissertation establishes a link between the literature on freelancing and entrepreneurship by showing how, despite paradoxical tensions, freelancers adopt strategies that make freelancing sustainable and create opportunities for entrepreneurial experimentation that can lead to full-fledged entrepreneurial careers. This perspective redefines freelancers, previously considered to be in a transitional or ‘liminal’ (Van Gennep, 1909/1960) phase to entrepreneurship, due to the similarities and overlaps between the two concepts (e.g., Folta et al., 2010; Vučković et al., 2023; Burke & Cowling, 2020; Hušek et al., 2021). While entrepreneurial activities take place during a freelancer's career, the term ‘liminality’ implies that freelancing is merely a step on the path to becoming an entrepreneur. In this study, however, freelancing is seen as a distinct and unique career decision that, when effectively managed, opens up new potential entrepreneurial career paths.

6.2 Practical implications

This dissertation provides important insights for various stakeholders, such as organisations (a), managers (b), employees (c), freelancers (d) and policy makers (e). By adopting

tailored practises, these organisations may address the specific needs of freelancers and improve their contributions, fostering a more inclusive and efficient work environment.

a. Starting with organisations, recognising the unique role of freelancers is an essential prerequisite for developing inclusive and responsible human resource management practises. Therefore, they should establish clear, transactional contracts that explicitly set out expectations and responsibilities, as well as the scope of work and terms of engagement, providing a solid foundation for the freelancer's role within the organisation. In addition, the development of flexible benefits specifically tailored to freelancers (e.g., health insurance adapted to their situation, access to training projects) could counteract job and income insecurity and provide freelancers with a sense of security and appreciation. Organisations could also introduce human resource management practises that reflect the evolving nature of freelancing and the specific contexts of different projects and teams to develop a dynamic approach to supporting freelancers' professional development and thus a culture of continuous collaboration and innovation with project teams.

b. Managers have a key role to play in integrating freelancers into their teams and creating a supportive environment. They should focus on empowering freelancers to build strong relationships within the team by fostering social cohesion, trust and a sense of belonging. In this regard, involving freelancers in team activities and encouraging open communication are key strategies, while creating a collaborative team culture that recognises and values the contributions of freelancers is also essential. This requires understanding the dual identity of freelancers as insiders and outsiders and managing the paradoxical tensions they experience.

c. For employees working with freelancers, it is important to create a welcoming and inclusive environment. Practises that include freelancers in team activities and decision-making processes help build trust and foster a sense of belonging, while collaborating with them and

sharing knowledge and resources to achieve common goals can improve team dynamics and overall performance. Overall, recognising the value that freelancers bring can strengthen the effectiveness of teams.

d. Freelancers themselves can benefit from understanding the dynamics of their role and the strategies that can enhance their work experience. Actively seeking to build strong relationships within the teams they work with builds trust and social cohesion, and utilising the resources available and training opportunities offered by client organisations can enhance their skills and career development. Developing strategies to manage the paradoxical tension between insider and outsider roles is also important. Balancing autonomy and integration and using this dynamic to their advantage can lead to a more successful and fulfilling freelance career.

e. Policy makers can play a critical role in supporting freelancers by developing regulations and policies that recognise their unique status. Implementing labour laws that protect freelancers' rights and address their unique needs, such as job security, fair compensation and access to benefits, is essential. In addition, policies that promote freelancing as a viable career path and provide access to resources, training and networks can help freelancers succeed. Creating frameworks that recognise the hybrid nature of freelancing ensures that policies can be adapted to the different experiences and needs of freelancers.

6.3 General limitations and future research

This dissertation should be assessed against its limitations. The first limitation is the scope of the dissertation itself. Indeed, we introduce the concept of team-based insider status, extending the concept of perceived insider status or otherwise offering a more granular view centred on the team in which the individual works. This granular view expands Liu et al.'s (2014) leader-based

perceived insider status. In other words, I offer a new dimension of perceived insider status. However, scholars should not stop here. As authors such as Coyle-Shapiro and Shore (2007) or Ashforth et al. (2020) point out, organisations are not monolithic entities, and members of the same organisation may develop different relationships with different groups, resulting in multiple psychological contracts, so we can assume that perceived insider status varies across groups and within the same organisation. This emphasises the need for a multifocal approach to understand perceived insider status in these different groups. Perceived insider status would vary according to the perspectives of different types of workers and their relationships with different organisational members.

Second, building on this idea, authors like Lapalme et al. (2009) and Ferdman and Davidson (2002) suggest that diverse categories of workers may perceive insider status differently. Although I have contributed to this idea in this dissertation, a comparative analysis of perceived insider status among diverse types of workers (contingent workers, full-time employees, or not) could provide deeper insights into how perceptions thereof are formed and determine whether these perceptions, as well as the processes that lead to these perceptions and outcomes, are unique to each category of worker. Following on from this last point, I suggest that scholars investigating belonging in general and perceived insider status in particular make greater use of qualitative research. This endeavour can be quite a challenge, as it is difficult to recruit such a specific population. I, along with previous researchers, have encountered this challenge in our research projects (Shevchuk et al., 2019). Nonetheless, the findings that emerge from the qualitative methods offer a wealth of new ways to understand the phenomena. Returning to the need for further research on how different groups of workers might experience belonging and perceived insider status, such a study could have not only theoretical but also rich practical implications. For

example, organisational efforts to promote worker inclusion or relationships with organisational agents might affect agency workers differently from part-time or full-time workers. There could also be variances within the same category of workers; for example, agency workers with potential opportunities for permanent employment could have more positive work outcomes than those without such opportunities. This dissertation is thus a further step towards a broader, more multifaceted examination of perceived insider status. It advocates for the exploration of this concept across a broader range of workers, particularly contingent workers and their subgroups such as freelancers, in various contexts such as countries, industries, pay levels and legislation, considering all significant factors that may influence them.

A third limitation of this dissertation is that it could analyse a larger group of individuals over a longer period and shed more light on the individual phenomena. Although this dissertation pioneers the development of a process model to examine the experience of and coping with the insider-outsider paradox, as well as the role of freelancers' entrepreneurial activities, it should be noted that this study only represents a first step. A larger sample and a longer engagement with the participants would allow a more detailed investigation of these phenomena, e.g., the transitions from freelancing to entrepreneurship and vice versa. In addition, other dimensions that influence being an insider or how individuals process their experiences could also be explored, such as the psychological profiles of participants, which could shed light on how these profiles influence the management of the insider-outsider paradox and the transition to entrepreneurship, potentially bridging paradox theory, freelancing and entrepreneurship literature. Building on the previous point, future research could also explore participants' approaches to overcoming the insider-outsider paradox in more detail. Specifically, researchers could delve into the factors that influence the selection of paradoxical thinking or third space strategies, the activities linked to these

strategies, and the resulting career outcomes. Furthermore, examining these phenomena from an identity perspective could provide additional insights into the dynamics of the game.

6.4 Final Conclusion

Notwithstanding its limitations, this dissertation offers invaluable insights into the nuanced sense of belonging freelancers feel towards their organisations and teams, alongside the strategies they employ to navigate the insider/outsider paradox encountered in their daily work. Additionally, it delves into how the management of this paradox influences their entrepreneurial ventures. Evidence from Chapters 3–4 indicates that freelancers often perceive themselves as insiders within client teams while simultaneously adopting an outsider stance in relation to their organisations. This complex dual perception is sustained through a variety of strategies. Contrary to the prevailing literature, which predominantly sees insider status as beneficial and outsider status as detrimental, our findings suggest that being viewed as an outsider by client organisations can yield positive outcomes. Furthermore, freelancers' sense of belonging and insider identity within project teams significantly boost their work engagement, influenced profoundly by team support, social cohesion, and trust. This research pioneers a new perspective by examining their insider and outsider traits as a dynamic paradox, necessitating careful management. The way in which these tensions are managed could either lead to unsustainable tensions that drive freelancers back into traditional employment or, if skilfully managed, help to ensure that freelance careers are sustainable. Our study also introduces the concept of temporality into the management of these tensions and shows that effective strategies enable freelancers to pursue and develop entrepreneurial projects. These findings show that freelancing is a career path characterised by both insider and outsider qualities and is distinguished by its unique characteristics. I hope that

this dissertation will stimulate further research into the experiences of freelancers, particularly with regard to the insider-outsider paradox and its impact on their career paths. I also hope that the insights gained from this dissertation will be translated into practical applications (articles and strategies) that will benefit policy makers, managers and freelancers alike, thus enriching the daily experiences of the latter cohort.

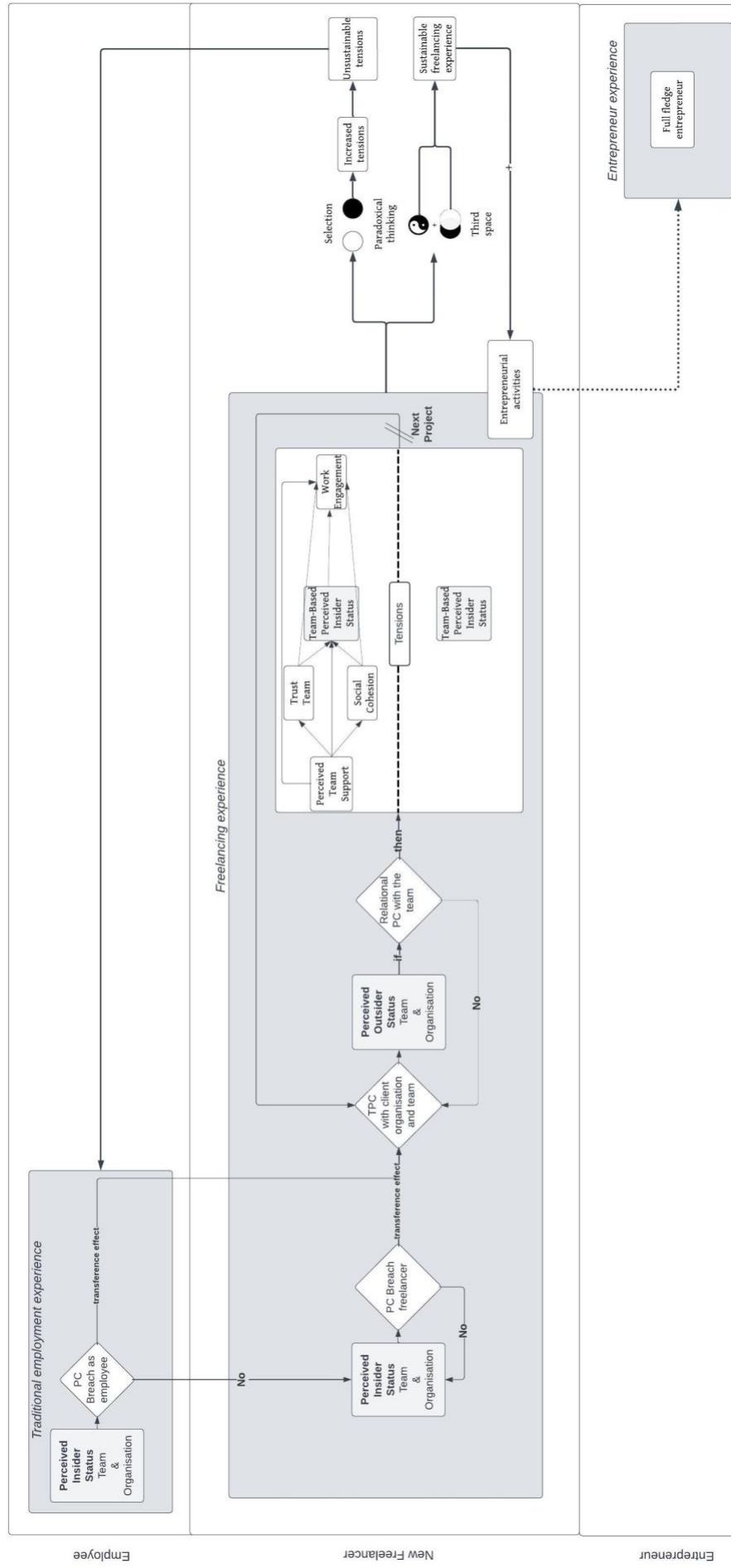


Figure 6-1 Overview of the findings

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