

# **The Impact of Hybrid Working on Organisational Acculturation in New Starters: A Multidimensional Approach**

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the MA  
in Human Resources Management.

Presented to the National College of Ireland.

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## Abstract

*The Irish Civil service is undergoing a period of reform, currently employing a shared values approach to Organisational Culture (OC) as an approach to improve organisational performance. Recent shifts to hybrid working patterns precipitated by the Covid-19 pandemic and adopted by the civil service through its Blended Working Policy Framework have not been explored adequately in terms of their impact on Organisational Acculturation (OA). The purpose of this study, therefore, is to investigate how hybrid work environments affect the acculturation process among new starters in a civil service organisation.*

*Research was conducted in a civil service organisation with over 300 employees, adopting a qualitative approach, underpinned by the multidimensional approach to acculturation. Semi-structured interviews were conducted on twelve employees who were in their first six months of employment. Thematic analysis was applied to the data.*

*Four themes emerged. The first revealed a three-phased model of OA comprising an Impression Phase an Information Seeking Phase and an Experiential Phase, mediated by individual factors resulting in individualised experiences of OA. The second theme revealed that OA was not static but iterative, as respondents reframed their understanding of OC based on their experience and interactions in the organisation. The third theme revealed that interpersonal interactions were paramount to OA and the final theme revealed that hybrid environments could facilitate the development of microcosms of OC. The study revealed a need for thoughtful strategies to support leadership development, reinforce OC and address gaps in communication and collaboration to support better OA in hybrid environments.*

*This study may be of interest to HR Practitioners and employers as it seeks to understand OA, identify challenges and benefits of hybrid working in relation to OA and provide recommendations for the enhancement of OA in a hybrid setting. Future research could develop the phased model of OA further, contributing to existing literature on OA. It could also evaluate the efficacy of the recommendations proposed herein.*

**Keywords:** Hybrid Work, Remote Work, Blended Work, Acculturation, Organisational Culture, Civil Service

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The Impact of Hybrid Working on Organisational Acculturation in New Starters: A Multidimensional Approach

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# List of Abbreviations

AV – Audio Visual

CIPD – Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development

L&D – Learning and Development

OA – Organisational Acculturation

OC – Organisational Culture

TA – Thematic Analysis

# 1. Introduction

The purpose of this study is to examine how hybrid working influences the acculturation process in new employees in an Irish civil service organisation. The organisation, which will remain anonymous, is a medium sized civil service organisation with approximately 300 employees, headquartered in Dublin, with smaller regional offices in three locations in the Republic of Ireland. This section will provide the background to the study, situate it within the context of existing literature on the topic and identify its contributions to the current body of knowledge on acculturation. It will then discuss the aims and objectives of the study and provide an overview of subsequent chapters.

## 1.1 Background

What began as a response to a global emergency has now evolved into a deliberate choice for many organisations with strong support from the workforce to maintain some form of hybrid working. A recent survey indicated that 60% of employees would turn down a job offer if it did not offer hybrid working (Stedman, 2024). Changes to work patterns brought about by Covid-19 have impacted workers and workplaces to varying degrees, and the civil service is no exception. As with other sectors, large sections of the civil service commenced remote working in early 2020. With the lifting of Covid-19 restrictions, the civil service has seen a shift to hybrid working, with a mix of days working remotely and days working from the employer's work premises. The civil service formalised this change through its Blended Working Policy Framework for Civil Service Organisations (Ireland. Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, 2022), which mandates that civil service employers move to a 20% remote working pattern.

### ***Hybrid Working in the Civil Service***

As part of the larger public services, the civil service employs over 40,000 individuals who play a role in the functioning of government and the administration of public services (Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, 2024). These changes not only impact a large segment of the Irish workforce, but also affect the larger population in terms of

delivering quality public services, maintaining governance and accountability and ensuring economic efficiency.

Alongside these shifts in work patterns, a 10-year civil service reform strategy that is being implemented through a series of 3-year plans, is underway. The first of these (Civil Service Renewal 2024, 2021) has the development of a high-performing and responsive civil service with values-based culture as one of its core themes. The conduit through which to achieve this is OC. While there is strong theoretical and research support of the relationship between OC and organisational performance (Richter et al., 2016), more understanding is required around the changed working landscape in the civil service in Ireland and its impact on the acquisition of OC (acculturation).

### ***A Multidimensional Definition of Acculturation***

In research literature, how acculturation is defined is contingent upon both the theoretical framework in which the study is situated and on the specific variables under study, as identified by the researcher. Furthermore, given its relevance across multiple disciplines, how acculturation is defined can vary significantly. This is explored in greater detail in the literature review section. Complicating matters further are related concepts such as organisational socialisation, which focuses specifically on the processes through which employees adapt to organisational norms and practices (Tuttle, 2002), and the concept of OC, which comprises shared values beliefs and behaviours within an organisation (Schein, 2010). This study diverges from solely focusing on onboarding processes to exploring broader processes and factors that influence the acquisition of OC. Consequently, there is a need to adopt a more comprehensive definition of acculturation. For the purposes of this study, the term “organisational acculturation” (OA) is used to specifically refer to processes within the workplace. Organisational acculturation is defined as the interplay of individual, interpersonal, social, environmental and technological factors and processes that influence an employee’s acquisition of OC.

Evolving workplaces, owing to a combination of advancements in technology and the rise in remote working, have expanded the scope of acculturation whereby traditional acculturation theories may not fully capture the complexities of these new environments.

More recent studies have suggested the exploration of a multidimensional approach (Douceirain, 2019; Douceirain et al., 2013; Gonzalez Loureiro et al., 2015; Harush et al., 2016; Lee et al., 2018; van de Vijver, 2015; Vora et al., 2019) that accounts for the simultaneous existence of cultures, sub-cultures and hybrid cultures beyond mainstream and heritage culture (Martin and Shao, 2016; West et al., 2017). Although further work needs to be done to conceptualise and operationalise multidimensional models of acculturation (van de Vijver, 2015), this study contributes to ongoing discourse by applying this approach to explore whether hybrid working impacts OA in new starters in the civil service.

## **1.2 Significance of Study**

Besides the theoretical gaps identified in the preceding section, this study is of particular significance in the present context as sustaining culture was reported to be one of the biggest challenges emerging from remote/hybrid working (CIPD, 2024). Since 2020, some studies have focused on OC within virtual work environments (Asatiani, 2020). These studies considered factors that impacted the transition to remote work and still others explored the impact of remote work on factors such as employee engagement, employee wellbeing, collaboration and innovation. While some studies have investigated cultural change and adaptation (Łukasik-Stachowiak, 2022), limited attention has been given to the adaptive processes of new starters in the Civil Service. This is of increasing significance to the Civil Service in Ireland, as its increasingly diverse workforce is set to diversify further with the government announcing the eligibility of individuals with Stamp 4 visas to apply for civil service jobs in October 2023. Furthermore, the Civil Service's shift towards hybrid working has created a gap in understanding how OC is acquired in hybrid work environments, and it is in this context that acculturation, or the process through which culture is acquired, becomes a crucial concept in organisational research.

### **1.3 Research Aims and Objectives**

To address the gaps discussed in the previous sections, this study aims to investigate the impact of hybrid working on the acculturation process among new starters in a civil service organisation. The objectives are:

1. To examine the existing acculturation process
2. To investigate hybrid working practices
3. To explore employees' experience with hybrid working
4. To identify challenges and benefits of hybrid working in relation to acculturation
5. To provide recommendations for enhancing acculturation in hybrid work environments.

### **1.4 Findings**

Adopting a qualitative approach, this study involved conducting semi-structured interviews with twelve employees who were in their first six months in the organisation. Thematic analysis was applied and revealed a multi-phased, iterative OA process that was underpinned by personal and professional antecedents that resulted in individualised experiences of OA and OC. Interpersonal interactions were found to be of paramount importance for the acculturative process and finally findings indicated that hybrid working could encourage the development of subcultures within teams, departments and directorates.

### **1.5 Outline and Structure**

This next section comprises a review of the extant literature on OA, identifying gaps in existing knowledge and establishing the need for and relevance of the proposed study. It also provides a theoretical and methodological foundation for the study, and it is from this review that the research aims, objectives and questions emerge. This is followed by a

discussion of the methodological approach, where sampling, data collection and analytical approaches are discussed and justified. Data is then analysed and interpreted, drawing on relevant theories and making comparisons to existing research findings. The implications and limitations of the study are discussed offering a critical evaluation of its contribution to the advancement of existing research. Finally, the applications of the study are examined, and recommendations are provided, with financial and other resource implications being considered.

## **2 Literature Review**

This section will provide an overview of the current body of literature pertaining to acculturation, with a specific focus on OA and hybrid working, critically evaluating key theoretical approaches and establishing the theoretical framework that will guide the present study. This section will also demonstrate the study's relevance by establishing how it addresses contemporary concerns of researchers and HR practitioners. As this study is specifically concerned with how hybrid environments affect OA in the Civil Service, this section will include an overview of the Civil Service and the need for this study in this context. Identifying both gaps in current literature and best practices will inform the research question and overall study design.

### **2.1 Acculturation**

Acculturation is a topic that is studied across various disciplines, including sociology, anthropology, and social and cross-cultural psychology. Interest in acculturation began in anthropology, with sociology and cross-cultural psychology soon following suit (Sam and Berry, 2006). Its definitions are as varied as domains from which studies on the topic originate. Early studies in acculturation focused on the influence of group interaction on human behaviour and intergroup relations (Valenzuela et al., 2021). An early definition of acculturation described it as the process through which individuals or groups that come into contact with each other adjust to the new cultural context by changing their values, behaviours, and/or identities (Redfield et al., 1936). In an organisational context, acculturation refers to how changes in individuals' cultural orientation take place in response to interactions with their organisational environment (Valenzuela et al., 2021).

#### **2.1.1 Definition**

While extant literature on OA focuses on determining its effect on factors such as performance (Tadmor et al., 2012), workplace attitudes (Leong, 2001; Nguyen et al., 2007), social relations (Jian, 2012; Olson et al., 2013) and career success (Hajro et al., 2019), there is a high level of

consensus from a theoretical perspective on the origin of OC, with Brown (1998) identifying three sources of OC;

- (i) societal or national culture within which the organisation is situated,
- (ii) organisational leadership, and
- (iii) the interaction between the type of business that an organisation does and the business environment in which it operates.

Other theorists have expanded on these primary approaches through the incorporation of diverse factors, leading to the emergence of several distinct definitions of acculturation, a selection of which are examined below.

Dimensionality is one way theories (and therefore definitions) of acculturation can be approached. Dimensionality refers to whether one or more than one culture is affected by intercultural contact. Early research in acculturation was largely unidimensional, focusing on assimilation, whereby acculturation was seen as a process whereby an individual adopted mainstream culture and discarded their heritage culture (Gordan, 1964; Graves, 1967). Berry (1997) takes a bidirectional viewpoint and defines acculturation as a process in which changes to two cultural systems are induced through interaction. Larsson and Lubatkin (2001) envision it as a formulation of a joint culture where values, beliefs and assumptions come together through cooperative processes. In an organisational context, Nahavandi and Malekzadeh (1998) define acculturation to describe changes which occur when two organisations interact with each other. Rodríguez (2005) sees it as a generative approach whereby a third culture emerges from the combination of the best features of two OCs. This is explored further in section 2.1.2 that discusses theoretical approaches to acculturation.

These preceding definitions are highly reflective of two dominating themes in the area of OA research. The first area focuses on the actors, challenges and processes that impact OA within the context of cross-cultural management, particularly in the area of mergers and acquisitions and within large multinational organisations (Davis and Meyers, 2018) with global subsidiaries. The second major theme focuses on the OA processes of migrant workers. In terms of

dimensionality, more recent research has suggested that a third approach that views acculturation as a complex process involving multiple dimensions exists. Proponents of this approach argue that a single mainstream culture may be hard to define (Caprar et al., 2015) and that cultural hybrids exist (Martin and Shao, 2016; West et al., 2017).

It is within this framework that the current study is situated and applied to the organisational context. Research into the ‘mechanics’ of how individuals acquire OC in concomitant but distinct environments (traditional office settings and remote work environments), is not as well developed, and it is this area that the present study seeks to explore within the context of hybrid working. Additionally, in a hybrid environment, individuals may find themselves more dependent on their team to understand OC. This possible disconnect from the broader organisational context could lead to difference in environmental factors and social interactions between teams, potentially impacting how acculturation takes place. This present study, therefore, is interested in how individuals with hybrid working patterns acquire OC. As discussed in section 1.1, for the purpose of this study, the definition of OA is operationalised to include individual, interpersonal, social, environmental and technological factors and processes that interplay and influence an employee’s acquisition of OC.

### **2.1.2 Theoretical Framework**

This section explores the theoretical antecedents of acculturation, structured into two parts, the first of which critically examines early theories of acculturation while the second introduces more recent developments in this area. This discussion culminates in the description of the multidimensional viewpoint which serves as the theoretical framework for this study.

#### ***Early Approaches***

With its origin in anthropological enquiries, early research in acculturation focused on cultural change in immigrants in societies of settlement. This led to the conceptualisation of acculturation as a unidimensional process. Early theories disregarded individual differences and did not explore acculturation beyond first contact. This approach assumed that immigrants would relinquish their heritage culture and assimilate into the dominant culture (Castro and Rudmin, 2020).

Graves' (1967) introduction of the concept of psychological acculturation that focused on changes at an individual level, led to a shift towards a bidimensional understanding of acculturation, most notably by Berry (1997), who introduced a cognitive dimension, arguing that the adoption of the dominant culture may not necessarily take place at the cost of the heritage culture.

Berry's (1997) bidimensional model of acculturation posits that individuals or groups undergoing the acculturative process do so by navigating two dimensions; contact with the dominant culture and maintenance of their heritage culture. How far the individual or group maintains or rejects their heritage culture while accepting or rejecting their host culture, leads to four acculturation strategies;

- (i) assimilation wherein no connection to the heritage culture is maintained while norms and values of the dominant culture are adopted,
- (ii) Integration, where the heritage culture is maintained while engaging with the dominant culture,
- (iii) separation wherein the dominant culture is rejected and a strong connection to the heritage culture is maintained, and
- (iv) Marginalisation, where a disconnection from both the dominant and heritage culture is experienced.

While Berry's model has been widely applied in both cross-cultural psychology studies and organisational research, its binary framework may not capture the multidimensionality of cultural identity (Sam and Berry, 2010). In an organisational context, individuals may exhibit multiple cultural identities based on country of origin, work history, socio-economic background, the generation they belong to and the role they are undertaking within the organisation, which could result in a more nuanced experience of OA.

### ***Recent Approaches***

More recent research has focused on investigating the acculturative experience of immigrants from a number of different theoretical standpoints, explored below:

- (i) The **cultural learning perspective** focuses on the learning processes through which culture is acquired, the focus of research primarily being second culture learning. This approach assumes that cross-cultural issues arise out of difficulties that cultural novices have in navigating social encounters and that adaptation arises from learning culture-specific skills (Masgoret and Ward, 2006).

While this perspective highlights the importance of learning through interaction, it ignores the importance of individual agency and pays limited attention to non-observable factors such as personality, identity conflicts and individual differences in coping mechanisms. Furthermore, it assumes cultural homogeneity and ignores the possibility of individuals having multiple cultural identities or a culture possessing multiple subcultures. Finally, it ignores structural inequalities and power dynamics whereby factors such as marginalisation, discrimination and unequal access to resources can impact how individuals or groups integrate.

- (ii) Expanding the scope of the cultural learning perspective to account for dual cultural identities, the **developmental perspective** views acculturation as a developmental process through which children and adolescents from ethnic minorities acquire skills and knowledge of both heritage and majority culture (Karim, 2021). Besides limiting analyses to two cultures, critics of this approach assert that ascertaining whether behavioural, cognitive and affective changes are due to normative development or acculturation is difficult, if not impossible (Titzmann and Silbereisen, 2012).
- (iii) The theories discussed so far have ignored the importance of contextual factors on the acculturation. However, the **ecological model** of acculturation considers the interactions of different biographies in multicultural settings, suggesting that acculturation may be experienced differently across different contexts of socialisation (Karim, 2021).
- (iv) Several recent studies into acculturation have recognised its multidimensional character (Schwartz et al., 2010), but research in this area is nascent (Valenzuela, 2021). Proponents of the **multidimensional approach** view acculturation as a complex and multidimensional phenomenon. This approach sees acculturation taking place through multiple trajectories

(Syed and Juang, 2018; Karim, 2019), with individuals acquiring the skills, values and identities and practices related to both mainstream and heritage culture at different rates (Schwartz et al., 2010). Gender was found to affect acculturative adaptation whereby social structuring across gendered lines impacted acculturative experiences (Bacallao and Smokowski, 2007).

While these studies were undertaken in the context of integration of transmigrants into a mainstream national culture, its implications for the workplace processes and policies are of interest.

## **2.2 Hybrid Working**

Also referred to as blended working, hybrid working is characterised by a mix of remote and on-site work. Given global changes in work patterns, this area has received significant interest in the recent years, with key research themes examining the impact of hybrid working arrangements on individuals (Biron and Bamberger, 2010), organisations (Golden and Gajendran, 2019) and the broader work environment (Dattner et al., 2019). This shift in working patterns has changed how employees interact, collaborate and assimilate into OC (Felstrad and Hensekem 2017). Understanding how these changes impact OA is crucial to developing effective acculturation strategies in this changed environment. Gifford (2022) sees the increase in remote working as a fundamental shift in the way we work, necessitating a need for a contextualised research agenda of core Human Resource (HR) topics such as learning and development (L&D), people management, communication, and relationships and organisational productivity.

The effects of hybrid working on variables such as employee engagement, employee performance (Jindain and Gilitwala, 2023), employee satisfaction and organisational commitment (Camp et al., 2022) have been studied with research reporting hybrid working as having a positive effect on employee engagement (Felstead et al., 2002), which in turn had a positive effect of employee performance (Jindain and Gilitwala, 2023). Oppong Peprah (2023), however, reported a gradual loss of corporate identity owing to hybrid working, a concern

echoed by 56% of respondents to CIPD's (2024) recent report on HR practices in Ireland, who saw sustaining culture as one of the top challenges facing Irish organisations. Team learning was also found to be negatively impacted in hybrid work environments (Oppong Peprah, 2023). While some studies have considered the impact of hybrid working models on social interactions and OC (Oppong Peprah, 2023), OA specifically has not been extensively studied, underscoring a need for additional research in this area. Hybrid working in its current state of ubiquity is a relatively recent phenomenon and research in this area is emerging. This study seeks to add to current literature by exploring the concept of acculturation within the context of recent changes to work patterns, focusing specifically on these changes within the Irish civil service.

## **2.3 The Irish Civil Service**

Workforces have become increasingly diverse owing to globalisation, with people moving and companies expanding their operations globally. While this has not been a recent phenomenon, demographic shifts have caused skills shortages, leading to organisations having to hire from a more diverse pool of candidates, including candidates from overseas. Legal and regulatory changes, combined with changes in social and workplace norms has led to an evolving attitude towards diversity and inclusion with technological advances making remote and hybrid working possible, thereby facilitating some of this diversity.

Despite an unemployment rate of 4.4% as of April 2023 (Central Statistics Office, 2023) the Civil Service has been growing, employing 14% of the estimated labour force in 2022, showing a 2.8% growth from the previous year. This is in part due to the extension of recruitment eligibility criteria to non-EU nationals with a Stamp 4 visa. Furthermore, mandatory retirement age for employees in the civil service is now 70 (Ireland. Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, 2021), creating a multigenerational workforce that must cater to entrants belonging to multiple generations. Additionally, the Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty places a duty on public service bodies, including the civil service to monitor and report on workforce diversity. In an effort to ensure that the public sector in Ireland accurately reflects the diverse population it serves, the Disability Act (2005) mandates that a minimum of 3% of employees of public sector

bodies should be individuals with disabilities, and there is a requirement for annual reporting on compliance with these numbers. Furthermore, the Gender Pay Gap Information Act 2021 mandates that (over time) all organisations with 50 or more employees must publish information on pay disparities between male and female employees.

Along with these expected and mandated increases in diversity, a number of legislative changes that enable the participation of a more diverse workforce have been implemented. The Blended Working Policy Framework for Civil Service Organisations (Ireland. Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, 2022) mandates that public sector employers move to a 20% remote working pattern. Other legislation that applies to employees such as the Work Life Balance and Miscellaneous Provisions Act 2023 which introduces measures that provide workers with greater flexibility and support, such as the Right to Request Flexible Working, statutory entitlement to leave for medical care, paid leave for victims of domestic violence, enhanced parental leave that increases the duration of unpaid parental leave, the right to disconnect that provides for disengagement from work-related communications outside normal working hours, and enhanced carers leaves, enables a more flexible and equitable workforce, which in turn supports the need to formalise flexible and hybrid working practices in the Irish workforce in general and the Civil service in particular.

Furthermore, as discussed in the introduction, the Irish Civil Service has been undergoing a period of reform. A shared values approach has been adopted with a viewpoint that a value aligned, shared culture will improve performance (Civil Service Renewal 2024, 2021). While extant literature supports the relationship between OC and organisational performance (Richter et al., 2016), the post-pandemic work landscape raises important questions in relation to how acculturation takes place in a hybrid environment. This research seeks to address this gap by examining how new starters in the civil service identify and acquire OC by addressing the questions discussed in the next chapter.

## **2.4 Conclusion**

Throughout history, macroenvironmental events have transformed workplaces. The COVID-19 pandemic saw shifts to remote working and an acceleration of digital transformation take place at a pace that was hitherto unfathomable. While the health and safety restrictions lifted in 2022, debates on the merits of hybrid working continued with a 2023 Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) report revealing that sustaining culture was identified by 71% of respondents as being the biggest challenge emerging from remote/hybrid working (CIPD, 2023a). While CIPD's HR Practices in Ireland 2024 report found that some of these concerns were alleviated, 56% of respondents still identified this as an area of concern. This is of particular interest to the public sector, where almost half (48%) of organisations have employees work offsite 3 days a week as opposed to 28% of private sector organisations. It is within this area the current study is situated, seeking to explore whether hybrid work impacts OA by answering the research questions discussed in the next section.

### 3. Research Questions

Virtual environments were found to face challenges in coordination (Choudoba et al., 2005) and communication owing to cultural diversity (Hardin et al., 2007). Asatiani et al. (2020) concur, stating that nurturing OC by reinforcing symbolic values, through enacting meaningful pragmatic actions, has been particularly problematic in highly virtual organisations. This signals the importance of ‘starting right,’ through robust acculturation practices. While some work has been done in the examination of acculturation in virtual organisations, limited research has been conducted on organisations that employ hybrid working practices with a clear gap in the literature on acculturation in the Civil Services. This study seeks to fill this gap by answering the following questions.

**Main Question: Does hybrid work impact OA in new starters in the Irish Civil Service?**

**Sub-question 1: What are the factors that influence the acquisition of OC in new starters in Civil Service?**

Several factors influence the acquisition of organisational culture. Notably, leadership behaviour (Schein, 2010), organisational policies and procedures (Cameron and Quinn, 2006), ceremonies and rituals (Deal and Kennedy, 1982), the workplace environment (Oldham and Brass, 1979) and employee interactions (Moran and Volkwein, 1992). The first question seeks to identify the unique combination of factors that influence the acquisition of OC.

**Sub-question 2: How are hybrid working practices implemented within the civil service organisation?**

The second question examines how hybrid working practices are implemented within the organisation. Flexible and remote working arrangements have been actively promoted in the civil service and supported by policies such as the National Remote Working Strategy (Ireland. Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, 2012), which outlines ways in which remote working can be facilitated and supported, and the

Blended Working Framework (Ireland. Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, 2022), which guides the implementation of hybrid work in the civil service. Civil service organisations are currently implementing these practices, and their success and impact remain to be seen.

**Sub-question 3: What are the experiences and perceptions of new starters in relation to hybrid working, particularly around the impact of hybrid working on the employees recognising and acquiring OC?**

Prior research has identified two elements of OC; symbolic and pragmatic. Symbolic elements are explicitly stated values and practices, and pragmatic elements consist of implicit elements that arise from day-to-day work and emerge through a socialisation process (Giorgi et al., 2015). Asatiani et al. (2020) theorise that the lack of face-to-face interaction in virtual work environments could result in a misalignment between the symbolic and pragmatic elements of OC, and challenges may emerge in the interpretation of organisational goals. In order to understand if a hybrid work environment impacts acculturation, it is proposed that the third sub-question establishes whether the pragmatic elements the employees' experience match the symbolic ones.

**Sub-question 4: What are the potential benefits and drawbacks of hybrid working in relation to the acculturation process?**

While hybrid models of working help organisations practise values such as inclusion, flexibility and autonomy, Felstead et al., (2002) warn of a potential erosion of OC, whereas Leonardi et al. (2013) point to communication and collaboration challenges, factors that may potentially impact acculturation. The fourth sub-question seeks to establish what the benefits and drawbacks of hybrid working are in relation to OA.

**Sub-question 5: Does the study identify recommendations for policies, practices and strategies that support effective acculturation in hybrid working environments?**

While there is much support from national policy on implementation of hybrid working, research into the processes through which employees are socialised into an organisation within a hybrid context, to identify ways in which employees are integrated and culture is reinforced in environments with face-to-face interaction, is limited (Raghuram et al., 2001). Based on the findings of this study, the final sub-question intends to make recommendations that support effective acculturation in hybrid working environments.

The next section describes how these questions were answered.

## **4. Methodology**

### **4.1 Introduction**

This section outlines the techniques and procedures employed in this study. It begins with an exploration of research fundamentals and major methodological approaches. It then addresses and justifies the choice of research methodology, sampling, data collection and analysis, situating them in the broader context of acculturation research by comparing them to alternative methods and existing studies in the field. It then addresses the limitations of the study and ends with a discussion of ethical considerations.

### **4.2 Research Methodology**

Saunders (2019) defines research as the process whereby data is systematically collected and interpreted, with a clear purpose, in order to find things out. In research, two fundamental methodologies are used to gather and analyse data. The quantitative approach uses numerical data and statistical methods, which allow for precise and consistent measurement, resulting in studies that are objective, reliable and generalisable, owing to the use of large sample sizes (Cresswell 2017). This method however can be susceptible to bias, particularly around sampling (Cresswell, 2014), and standardised instruments may also introduce measurement errors, if respondents misinterpret questions or if the instrument is not properly validated. Errors aside, quantitative research is unable to capture complex, context specific, multidimensional, evolving phenomena as it uses predefined variables (Patton, 2002).

The qualitative approach on the other hand, gathers, analyses and interprets non-numerical data such as words and images (Cresswell 2017), which allow for an in-depth understanding of complex phenomena. Furthermore, qualitative research methods could have the potential to uncover the intricacies and context specific details of complex, multilevel systems under study. This approach, therefore, lends itself to answering exploratory questions, seeking to generate theories based on the data collected, rather than testing predefined hypotheses (Charmaz, 2006), which impacts the choice of research paradigm, discussed further in the next section.

### **4.3 Research Paradigm**

This study adopts a constructivist research paradigm, as it emphasises the social and cultural contexts that shape individuals' constructions of reality, recognising the influence of norms, languages and shared meaning. As acculturation involves acquiring culture, which comprises a shared sets of values, beliefs, norms and social expectations, this approach lends itself aptly to the phenomenon under examination. This approach results in context specific, in-depth understanding of research phenomena that allows for the emergence of new insights, frameworks and theories from the data with a method that is flexible and conducive to iterative design based on emerging findings (Charmaz, 2014). The rationale for this choice is discussed in greater detail in section 4.4.

### **4.4 Research Approach and Strategy**

A review of research into OA and OC has revealed a shift from epistemological to ontological considerations with focus shifting from 'how OC is acquired' (OA) to 'what OC impacts and is impacted by' (OC). This means, that in the recent past, a large body of research has emerged, exploring how OC impacts factors such as organisational performance, organisational commitment, decision making and innovation. The interaction effects between variables such as leadership, diversity, organisational structure, sociopolitical structures, etc. on OC has also been studied using quantitative means. Another area of research focuses on the measurement and assessment of OC with tools such as the Denison OC Survey, the Competing Values Framework, the Cultural Values Survey, the OC Profile, the OC Inventory, and the Cultural Intelligence Assessment being developed.

This paper argues that while considerable attention has been given to the study of OC in the recent past, changes in the macro-environment has necessitated the revisitation of its progenitor, OA, as the ecosystem in which it operates is now changing.

Furthermore, given the recency of the hybrid work phenomenon, a foundational understanding of how acculturation takes place, where employees navigate more than one work environment, has not been sufficiently established. Therefore, constructivism's emphasis on contextual factors (von Glasersfeld, 1995) and use of flexible research tools such as the semi-structured interview (Charmaz, 2014), makes it well suited for studying the nuanced, contextual dependent factors that influence acculturation, particularly when more work needs to be done around refining and developing the multidimensional approach.

## 4.5 Sampling

Purposive sampling was chosen to select participants for the study, as sample groups have clear characteristics that enable the researcher to identify which employees to include in the sample. The method of sampling is seen as appropriate when the goal is to include experts or individuals with specific experiences, as is the case with the HR staff and new starters in the Civil Service, respectively (Teddlie and Yu, 2007).

**Sampling parameters:** The sample comprises 12 new starters to the civil service organisation. These are employees who have joined the company within 6 months prior to their interview. While there is a lack of consensus on the ideal time to study new starters' adjustment to their roles, research indicates that an employee's initial months in a new organisation are critical for OA, as this is when new employees are most actively learning job-specific skills, adapting to OC and forming important work relationships (Bauer et al., 2007). Feldman (1976) holds that employees form initial impressions and adjust to the OC in this early stage. Furthermore, the organisation where the research was conducted sees onboarding as occurring over the employees' initial 6 months, wherein a number of onboarding activities and milestones are set.

**Sample Size:** Determining ideal non-probabilistic sample sizes for interviews varies depending on the goals of the research, its complexity and the diversity of the population studied (Patton, 2002). A commonly cited range is between 5 and 25 participants (Saunders et al., 2019), with a range of between 6 and 10 interviews suggested for smaller projects (Fugard and Potts, 2015). Purposive

sampling commonly relies on saturation, or the stage at which no additional information emerges from the data. To address the lack of guidance around estimating sample sizes prior to data collection, Guest et al. (2006) studied sixty in-depth interviews, operationalising the concept of saturation and finding that saturation was reached within the first 12 interviews, with elements for metathemes emerging as early as six interviews. A sample size of 13 was chosen to allow for some refusals and drop offs. 12 interviews were undertaken with the intention of using saturation to indicate when data collection was complete, however, data saturation was not achieved by the 12th interview. The researcher decided to finalise the sample size at 12, as it is in keeping with suggested sample sizes for smaller research projects.

**Representation:** While the researcher made every effort to ensure the sample included employees from various grades, locations, genders and contract type, participation was voluntary and dependent on employee availability. Table 1 details characteristics of the population and the sample. Table 2 gives details of each individual participant. Participant codes are based on their demographic data as illustrated in Figures 1 and 2.

**Table 1: Population and Sample Characteristics**

Item	No. of New Starters		
	from Dec 2023 - June 2024	No. Invited	No. Participated
Total	26	13	12
Male	14	6	5
Female	12	7	7
Managers	3	3	3
Non-Managers	23	10	9
Direct	16	9	9
Indirect	10	4	3
Head Office	20	9	8
Regional Office 1	2	1	1
Regional Office 2	4	3	3

Regional Office 3	0	0	0
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**Table 2: Participant Codes where Generation X are respondents born between 1965 and 1979 and Generation Y are respondents born between 1980 and 1994 (McCrindle, 2014).**

Participant No.	Gender	Generation	Office	Manager	Contract Type	Participant Code
1	F	X	Head Office	No	Indirect	1F.X.HO.IDn
2	M	Y	Head Office	No	Direct	2M.Y.HO.Dn
3	M	X	Regional Office 1	No	Direct	3M.X.R1.Dn
4	F	Y	Head Office	No	Direct	4F.Y.HO.Dn
5	F	Y	Regional Office 1	No	Direct	5F.Y.R1.Dn
6	F	Y	Regional Office 2	No	Indirect	6F.Y.R2.IDn
7	M	X	Head Office	Yes	Direct	7M.X.HO.Dm
8	F	Y	Head Office	Yes	Direct	8F.Y.HO.Dm
9	M	X	Head Office	No	Indirect	9M.X.HO.IDn
10	F	Y	Head Office	No	Direct	10F.Y.HO.Dn
11	F	X	Head Office	Yes	Direct	11F.X.HO.Dm
12	M	Y	Regional Office 1	No	Indirect	12M.Y.R1.IDn

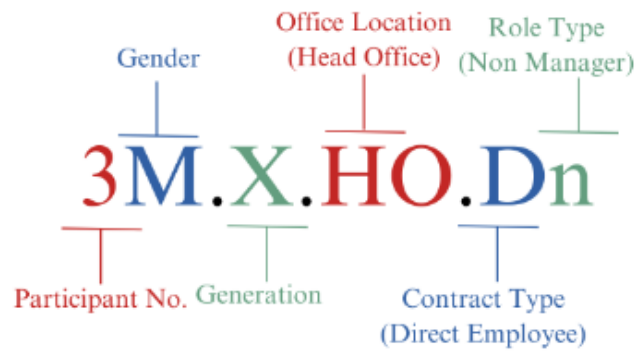


Figure 1: Example of Participant Code depicting that research participant was interviewed third, is male and belongs to Generation X. They work from the Head Office; they are directly employed by the organisation and are not in a managerial role.



Figure 2: Example of Participant Code depicting that the participant was interviewed seventh, is female and belongs to Generation Y. They work at Regional Office 2, are not directly employed by the organisation (agency worker, research placement, consultant) and are in a managerial role.

## 4.6 Data Collection

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews. An interview guide was developed based on initial themes identified from the literature review. The first version had 17 questions (see Appendix 5). These questions were refined and a pilot interview guide with 9 questions was tested on two participants (see Appendix 6). During the pilot, it was observed that the 8 omitted questions were organically addressed by both participants. Interviews were conducted via MS

Teams and were simultaneously recorded and auto transcribed. Additionally, the researcher maintained a notepad to capture noteworthy insights and areas for further exploration during the interview. All transcriptions were reviewed by the researcher and checked for transcription errors. Average interview time was 00:41:50 (hh:mm:ss).

## **4.7 Data Analysis**

Data analysis took place concurrently with data collection. Thematic Analysis (TA) was used to analyse the data. The reasoning for this choice is twofold. Firstly, its inductive approach allows for theory to emerge from the data, making it well suited to topics where little is known a priori (Charmaz, 2006). Secondly, it allows for the consideration of context and social factors, both important factors when studying hybrid working within the complex environment in which it has emerged.

TA is an analytical method for qualitative data, which involves identifying and reporting patterns in a data set, followed by interpretation for inherent meaning (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Liebenberg et al., 2020). From a philosophical point of view, TA lends itself to both inductive and deductive approaches. In the context of data analysis, inductive approaches align well where there is a need for “goal-free” evaluation through which theories are developed (Scriven 1991). Themes emerge from the data and lead to theory development. Deductive approaches, on the other hand, align with theory testing (Miles and Huberman, 1994). A pre-existing framework guides coding and theme development (Naeem et al., 2023).

In this study, systematic TA was used to identify and interpret themes or patterns that emerged within the data set (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The process is described as systematic, as it follows a structured, 6 step sequential process (see Figure 3) that facilitates clear links between the data, interpretation and conclusion, enabling better reproducibility and consistency, and minimising potential bias (Naeem et al., 2023). While the study has a theoretical framework, based on the multidimensional approach to acculturation, given that these dimensions are not clearly defined

in the current literature, an inductive approach to TA was employed.

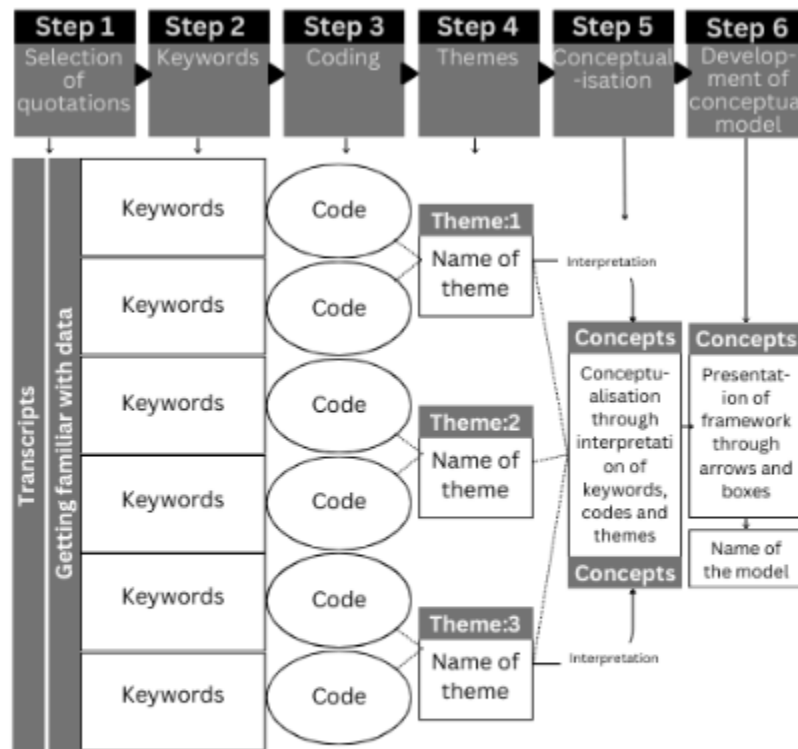


Figure 3: The 6-step systematic TA process for conceptual model development (Naeem et al., 2023).

## 4.8 Reliability and Validity

Common issues with semi-structured interviews relate to reliability and validity. Semi-structured interviews by their nature allow for variance in the order of questioning and the use of additional questions, based on conversation flow, making them ideal for exploratory and explanatory studies (Saunders et al., 2019). Further concerns extend to interviewer bias, not only where the interviewer's non-verbal behaviour and tone could affect interview responses, but in how responses are interpreted (Easterby-Smith et al., 2002).

Several measures were implemented to ensure the reliability and validity of the study. Prior to conducting the interview, an interview guide was prepared, reviewed, shortened and tested (see section 4.6) in a pilot study that was conducted on two interviewees, who were then asked for feedback on the questions, the interviewer, suitability of questions to the topic (content validity) and overall interview experience. No changes were proposed as a result of the pilot study.

Interviewee or response bias could also affect the study. This is discussed in more detail in section 4.10 on ethics. To overcome sampling bias, a representative sample was sought. To ensure external validity, data collection tools, sampling and analytical methods have been detailed in this section. Finally, to mitigate researcher bias, the researcher reflectivity, which Olmos-Vega et al. (2022) define as a self-conscious critique that researchers employ to evaluate how context and subjectivity influence the research process, was employed particularly around methodological and analytical considerations.

## **4.9. Limitations**

All research studies have limitations by virtue of all research designs having inherent weaknesses, which could potentially impact the outcome of the study (Ross and Bibler Saidi, 2019). Systematic biases such as errors in data collection, analysis and interpretations, could skew results in a particular direction. Being aware of what they are and addressing them early in the research process, could mitigate some of their effects (Theofanidis and Fountouki, 2018).

### **Sampling**

One of the limitations of this study is sampling. Fifty percent of the population was invited to participate. The response rate was satisfactory as out of the 13 candidates invited, 12 participated in interviews. While efforts were made to be representative, there were no interviewees in both the sample and the population, from the third regional office, neither were there any from Generation Z or Baby Boomers. The findings, therefore, may not fully capture the perspectives of this missing demographic. While a sample size of 12 may be regarded as sufficient for smaller qualitative studies, a sample size of between 20 and 30 is suggested for qualitative research aimed at developing theory in order to provide balance, depth and uncover meaningful themes and patterns (Cresswell, 2013). While this study revealed the beginnings of a theory, data saturation was not reached. Perhaps a slightly larger sample with more regional representation may have revealed interesting differences in the OA process between regional and head offices.

### **Generalisability**

Another limitation is generalisability. Findings from one civil service organisation may not be applicable to other organisations that may differ in context, culture and practices. In the organisation being studied in this project, there is much emphasis on OC, particularly as it is in a period of growth. It is a science-based, knowledge led organisation which actively promotes a culture of learning, enquiry and psychological safety in order to promote innovation. This could be a factor in participants' readiness to be interviewed and could account for responses of experiences in the organisation which are largely positive.

Further limitations have been discussed elsewhere in this study, with limitations to the qualitative approach discussed in section 4.6 along with a consideration of sources of interviewee bias. Challenges with semi-structured interviews and interviewer bias was discussed in section 4.8 and a discussion on power dynamics follows in section 4.10.

## **4.10 Ethical Considerations**

Blumberg et al. (2005) define ethics as norms, moral principles or standards of conduct that direct ethical decisions regarding our actions and interactions with others. Placing this in the context of research, Saunders et al. (2019) see ethics as having implications for how research topics are formulated, how the research process is designed, how data is accessed, collected, processed, stored and analysed and how research findings are interpreted and expressed. To assist with this process, the National College of Ireland's (NCI) research guidelines were applied throughout the research process. Prior to writing the research proposal, the researcher met with the Head of HR and the HR Manager to discuss the research proposal, its benefits to the organisation and any organisational concerns. Consent was obtained from a company director and the Head of HR. Ethical approval was then sought and received from NCI, ensuring compliance with NCI's ethical standards.

### **Consent**

Informed consent was sought at three points during the research process, via the invitation email (Appendix 3), through an informed consent form (Appendix 4) and prior to the commencement

of the interview (Appendix 8). Participants were also made aware that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time. Interviews were recorded audio-visually (AV) and transcribed in real time using MS Teams's auto transcription feature.

### **Use of AI**

The use of AI tools within research is an emerging area of study, particularly since this recent exploration of its integration with existing tools and technologies. The use of AI brings up two major concerns, those around accuracy and those around confidentiality. While Automatic Speech Recognition (ASR) technology has been in existence since the early 1950s, systems developed using recent advances in machine learning, particularly deep learning such as those used by Microsoft, result in robust and accurate speech recognition capabilities (Hinton et al., 2012). The decision to use AI assisted tools for transcription was taken on the proviso that it would be supplemented by human controls.

Part of the data analysis process involves the researcher familiarising themselves with the transcripts. During this process, the transcripts were checked for accuracy. In terms of confidentiality, MS Teams uses data encryption and end-user control over access to recordings and transcripts to maintain confidentiality. While MS Teams does not explicitly state whether it uses user generated data to train its AI models, it states compliance with the GDPR (Microsoft, 2024), which requires consent from data subjects to collect and process personal data, and places limitations on the purpose for which personal data can be used. Access protocols were set such that only the interviewee and interviewer had access to the AV file as well as the interview transcript. AV files were deleted once transcripts were checked. Participant files were categorised and saved using a participant number, and a participant code using demographic data was generated for use while analysing and discussing data (see Table 2).

### **Power Dynamics**

Another ethical consideration was power dynamics and its impact on cognitive access (Saunders et al., 2019). While the researcher interviewed participants from the same grade or higher, perceptions of perceived power difference between new employees who were on their probation and the researcher who was a member of the HR team, was considered. To address this, the researcher emphasised the voluntary nature of participation and highlighted that

confidentiality extended to both the identity of the participants and their data. Participants were offered the opportunity to contact the researcher via email or over MS Teams to discuss any concerns they may have.

#### **4.11 Conclusion**

This chapter outlined the research design, data collection and analysis employed in this study. A qualitative approach was deemed as most appropriate given the exploratory nature of the topic. As with all research, certain limitations were found and acknowledged. Future research could address these shortcomings by designing and deploying a survey on a larger cohort of employees, building on the findings presented in the subsequent findings and analysis section in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how OA takes place in a hybrid environment.

## 5. Analysis and Findings

This section presents the analysis and findings from the investigation into the impact of hybrid working on OA among new starters in a civil service organisation. The study's primary objective is to examine how hybrid working influences the acculturation process in this context. The analysis is based on data from 12 semi-structured interviews, where participants were asked questions derived from a pre-prepared interview guide with additional probing questions posed, based on their responses. Participants were asked to share their experiences around:

- Their views on how OA takes place and on the factors which contribute to it
- Current hybrid working practices
- Their individual experiences around hybrid working
- Challenges and benefits of hybrid working in regard to OA
- Recommendations for enhancing acculturation in hybrid work environments

### 5.1 Themes

Given the qualitative nature of the current study, it is important to acknowledge that it inherently uses the individual and distinct viewpoints of its participants, resulting in findings that are subjective, i.e. shaped by the researcher's interpretation of the primary data. Below are the 4 themes that emerged from the 12 semi-structured interviews. This section will address how these findings align with current research and explore potential future areas of research arising from these observations.

#### 5.1.1 Organisational Acculturation is a phased process

The first theme to emerge was that of a phased process of OA, resulting in a three-phased model of OA, described below and illustrated in Figure 4. 1F.X.HO.IDn described 3 phases that informed their OA experience; initial expectations about working in the organisation, research on the organisation and experiencing OC by working in the organisation. An analysis of responses from

other respondents seemed to reinforce OA as occurring through the three phases described below (see Table 3).

**The Impression Phase:** The first phase was the Impression Phase, comprising preconceived impressions of organisational characteristics that were formulated through information obtained passively (e.g. through expectations informed by experiences in other public sector organisations). Six respondents described forming impressions of the organisation's culture prior to joining the organisation. Impressions were formed through impressions of how public sector organisations worked, work experience in other public sector organisations, advertisements of services provided by the organisation and perceived alignment with personal and professional goals, owing to the sector in which the organisation worked.

**The Information Seeking Phase:** In the second phase respondents actively sought out information about the organisation. Eight respondents described seeking information by examining organisational documents, viewing the website and the organisation's LinkedIn page, and seeking out information from contacts within the organisation or from service providers such as employment agencies.

**The Experiential Phase:** In the third phase respondents experienced OC first-hand where all 12 respondents reported having experienced this phase. Respondents observed OC through formal and informal communication with members of the organisation, by observing or interacting with senior leadership, line managers and other colleagues, through organisational policies, processes and practices and by how technology was used.

There may be temporal overlaps between the second and third phases, but further exploration of this theory would be needed to understand these overlaps further. While there was significant reinforcement of the three phases between respondents, data saturation was not reached by the twelfth interview, possibly indicating that OA is a highly subjective experience. Furthermore, two respondents identified individual factors (self-discipline and individual differences) that did not fit into the three phases, but seemed to operate across all three phases of the acculturation process, contributing to how respondents observed, acquired and exhibited OC. This emerging model of OA is illustrated in Figure 4.

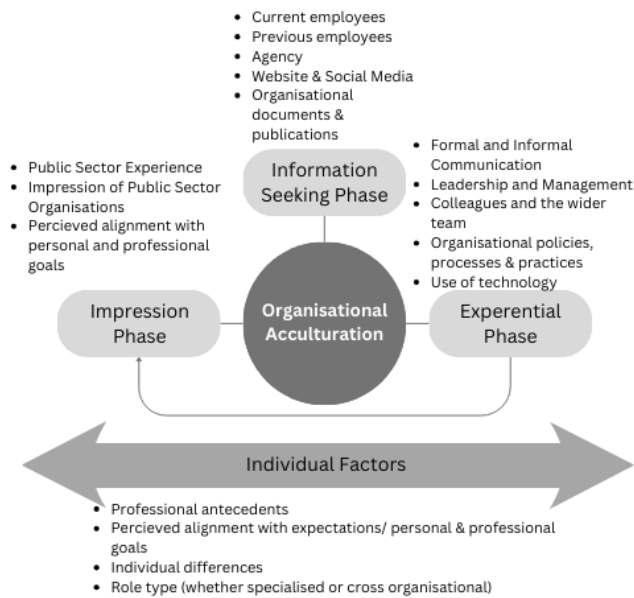


Figure 4: A Phased Model of OA

*“Yeah, I think, for me, I would have initially thought I've worked in a number of public service organisations, so there is a certain culture within those organisations. But as I researched for the role, I would have looked at the website and would have seen the HR strategy. I realised this is different from where the other public service organisations I've worked in. Very, very forward thinking, very creative, very innovative and looking into the future. And again, just working with the team, seeing all the learning and development initiatives, the approach to employee development and hybrid working, that kind of flexibility. I think that's certainly stepping out from what I would have experienced. “*

- 1F.X.HO.IDn

Table 3: OA Phases (Excerpt)

Keywords / Phrases	P 1	P 2	P 3	P 4	P 5	P 6	P 7	P 8	P 9	P 10	P 11	P 12	T	Phase
Actual culture though experience							1						1	Experiential Phase
Adapting work strategy to observed behaviours		1											1	Experiential Phase
Agency Info						1			1				2	Info Gathering Phase
Alignment with expectations						1						1	2	Experiential Phase
Alignment to career goals			1										1	Impression Phase

A major lacuna in both OA and OC research, is the lack of theories that integrate the concepts of OA and OC into a cohesive theoretical framework. When applied to organisational studies, acculturation effects on organisational variables such as workplace attitudes, performance, social relationships within the workplace, career success (Valenzuela, 2021) and job opportunities and development (Ermolaeva and Sisson, 2023) have been studied. The acculturative process when employees move from one type of OC to another has not been explored. This is of particular importance as average job tenures continue to fall, with Ireland having an average job tenure of 9.4 years in 2023, dropping from 10.2 years in 2015, and being lower than the EU's average of 10.5 years in 2022 (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2024).

Furthermore, the changing perceptions of OC during the initial acculturative process, or re-acculturation through the lifecycle of the employee, has not been adequately studied despite there being evidence of these changes from research into OC, with Hall (1979) seeing the career as a developmental process whereby employees go through various stages, each having varied cultural and social demands, and Schein (2010) holding that mid-career employees may often reassess their goals and values, leading to shifts in their alignment with the organisation's culture.

The study reveals a multi-phased process which overlaps temporally, indicating a continuous and evolving understanding of OC, which will be explored further in the next theme.

### 5.1.2 Organisational acculturation is iterative

While the current study only focuses on participants in their first 6 months with the organisation, an interesting theme regarding the iterative nature of OA has emerged that suggests that OA is

not a one-time phenomenon that occurs at the start of the employee's tenure in the organisation, but is an iterative process that is influenced by various factors and processes throughout the employee's tenure with the organisation. While there are no comparative organisational studies, a study of acculturating adolescents followed multiple acculturation trajectories across components such as behavioural acculturation, value acculturation and identity-based acculturation (Schwartz et al., 2020). Schwartz et al. (2020) further noted that the rate of acculturation may vary across the components. While in the present study, there seems to be some indication of a value-based acculturation taking place through observation and comparison with expected values and findings around alignment of personal and professional goals, followed by behavioural acculturation through modelling of observed behaviour, further exploration would be needed to clarify if a similar phenomenon occurs in an organisational setting.

When probed on what factors helped or hindered their acquisition of OC, the respondents stated that despite working a hybrid role, they were in constant communication with their team formally and informally, however, their perceptions of formal meetings changed over time. This suggests that learning and familiarity with company processes and terminology enabled their adaptation to OC.

Another participant, whose role includes facilitating cross-functional collaboration, distinguished between espoused and enacted values, agreeing that initially they found an alignment between espoused and enacted values, however, when they were in the organisation longer, they noticed pockets of entrenchment around "how things are done" and deliberate ambiguity around culture. This raises an important question: If employees' perceptions of OC shift as they engage with more organisation stakeholders, does this suggest that OA is an iterative process? Such a process would involve continual reframing and adaptation as employees encounter variations or misalignments between expected, espoused and enacted culture.

*"The first thing I looked to was the espoused cultural values. And then in terms of the understanding and adoption of the culture, there's the other aspect of the culture, which is learning how to stay in your lane and learning where the actual culture (is). My day one naive assumption is that they're all on the same team, and then over time you realise, no, they hate each other or they're fighting and there's old and new and so on. "*

Louis (1980) suggests that promotions to managerial roles require employees to adapt to new cultural norms and cultural expectations, thereby altering their experience of organisational culture, suggesting that how employees experience organisational culture could change, based on the roles they undertake in the organisation. This viewpoint is supported by Bauer and Erdogan (2011), who found that new managers underwent more intensive socialisation than other new employees in order to propagate OC, suggesting a role-based variation in how OA takes place.

There were variations in perceptions as to how static or variable OC was. Participants who noted variability tended to be either those with cross-functional roles or those who interact with a wider range of employees, owing to choosing to work from the office daily. Interestingly, the two participants who noted a strong alignment between the expectations and experience of OC were indirect employees from regional offices.



Figure 5: The iterative nature of OA

This points to the complex and dynamic nature of OA, with perceptions of cultural alignment and dynamism shifting over time as participants encounter entrenched practices or ambiguous cultural signals, suggesting that OA is not a static process, but rather an iterative one, where employees continually adapt and reframe their understanding of OC in response to new experiences and interactions. OA may therefore not end with phase 3 of the model proposed earlier in this study, but phase 3 could instead lead to further iterations of OA as the employee progresses through the organisation as illustrated in Figure 5. This, coupled with variations in

perception of OC's static or variable nature, highlights the need for ongoing cultural alignment and adaptation strategies for organisations to achieve a more cohesive and adaptive organisational environment. The exploration of OA through the employee's lifecycle is outside the scope of the current study but is, however, an interesting avenue for further research

### **5.1.3 In hybrid environments, interpersonal interactions are key to OA**

When asked what contributed to participants' understanding and adoption of OC, eleven out of twelve participants mentioned that their interactions with people helped them achieve organisational acculturation. While interpersonal connections had some impact at the Information Gathering Phase, with participants seeking information about the organisation from current employees or the agency they worked for, the biggest impact from interpersonal interactions had been at the Experiential Phase of OA. Four sub-themes have emerged, which are discussed below.

#### **5.1.3.1 Leadership and management**

Seven participants reported interactions with or observation of leadership/management behaviour as a factor that contributed to their understanding and adoption of organisational culture. This is very much in keeping with literature in this area.

When asked about what factors influenced their understanding of organisational culture, one participant identified leadership as playing a pivotal role in shaping and disseminating organisational culture, specifically modelling behaviours that foster a nurturing environment with a culture of knowledge sharing and support.

*"I think ultimately it must come from the top. I was in a meeting workshop today where the CEO was. It's very clear that there's a lot of pressure being put on his shoulders and on the shoulders of executive level people and senior managers. But it's being filtered through in a very kind of nice sort of nurturing sort of let's work together to achieve this sort of a way."*

- 9M.X.HO.IDn

1F.X.HO.IDn pointed to the autonomy afforded to them by their line-manager as an indicator of trust, and felt it had a positive impact on motivation. 6F.Y.R2.IDn, who had not worked in a hybrid

environment before, felt that their line-manager was crucial to putting them at ease in an environment they were unfamiliar with. Three participants discussed the role of senior management in OA with 6F.Y.R2.IDn, who worked from a regional office, noting that the presence of a director at the regional office and the scheduling of a board meeting there, led to a feeling of the organisation being culturally driven and backed up by actions as opposed to paying lip service by simply outlining values and culture in the handbook and website. 4F.Y.HO.Dn recounted how the CEO taking the time to meet them was a clear signal that the culture in this organisation was different from a similar organisation they previously worked at in another EU country.

The relationship between organisational performance, culture and leadership has also been well established (Ogbonna and Harris, 2000). Primary embedding mechanisms include deliberate role modelling, demonstrated by the CEO and other senior leaders introducing themselves to a new starter. Another mechanism is resource allocation. Moving board meetings to regional offices is yet another signal that leadership is conveying the importance of cross-locational working (Schein, 2010).

How leaders react to critical incidents and organisational crises, is another way in which Schein (2010) purports organisational culture is embedded. This may not be immediately apparent to employees lower down the hierarchy, as crises are managed by management with a more palatable version filtering down to non-managerial employees. It can be argued that this, in itself, is an expression of a culture where transparency and communication is selectively managed, revealing a top-down approach to information dissemination, under the hood. This highlights the nuance of OA whereby some employees may be privy to the full extent of a leader's responses to crises, resulting in a plurality in how OA occurs, based on the role that the new starter occupies within the organisation. This indicates the importance of OA for employees in managerial roles, indicating that special attention may need to be paid to employees in these roles in terms of the embedding of OC (OA) with regular check-ins and ongoing management training to ensure that they are effectively embedding and reinforcing OC.

### **5.1.3.2 Team and wider colleagues and organisational contacts**

Eleven out of twelve participants reported some form of influence from team members and other colleagues as contributing to their understanding of OC, often citing observational learning and modelling as means through which they've understood and adopted OC. 6F.Y.R2.IDn and 12M.Y.R1.IDn both reported obtaining information about the company's culture prior to interviewing, from the agencies they worked in. 4F.Y.HO.Dn, 5F.Y.R1.Dn, 6F.Y.R2.IDn and 9M.X.HO.IDn reported obtaining this information from contacts within the organisation prior to commencing work there.

1F.X.HO.IDn, 2M.Y.HO.Dx and 4F.Y.HO.Dn report using observational learning. 4F.Y.HO.Dn, 1F.X.HO.IDn and 11F.X.HO.Dm report using experiential learning either through interaction with other colleagues or by seeing the effect of the origination's culture through its culture of knowledge sharing (9M.X.HO.IDn) or its benefits to employees with caregiving responsibilities (1F.X.HO.IDn).

*“Partially observing, but also because I'm not in Dublin very often, I kind of went out of my way every time I'm in Dublin. I'd find a new desk or see somebody making coffee and I'd go up and introduce myself and I pushed myself out of the background. If have a question, I check Teams and I'm like, oh, I'll just drag you into my conversation. It's meant that I can build up a relationship with lots of different people that way, and people have been so open to not just helping but having a tiny bit of a chat on Teams.”*

- 5F.Y.R1.Dn

The above findings indicate that team dynamics and interpersonal interactions influence OA. Observational and experiential learning emerged as a common theme among participants and seem to be the processes through which observed facets of OC are converted into behaviour (i.e., these seem to be the processes through which OA takes place). Creating opportunities for network building may be one way through which OA may be strengthened.

There has been a growing body of cross-cultural research that examines the process of acculturation from a cultural learning perspective, which assumes that cultural novices learn culturally specific skills to manage difficulties they encounter in everyday social situations (Masgoret and Ward, 2006). Proponents of this approach believe that directing attention to learning processes could generate a better understanding of efficient methods of acculturative learning (Rudmin et al., 2017). This application of this theory to an organisational setting could be another avenue for research.

### **5.1.3.3 Interpersonal communication**

Formal and informal communication were reported to play a role in OA. One participant mentioned the importance of emails when asked about the factors that contributed to their understanding of organisational culture:

*“So, you can see the work environment that everybody takes responsibility for their roles, and they also share knowledge, and they also communicate as they send emails, they keep everybody informed about what's going on. So, transparency, communicating, sharing information are really important factors for me.”*

- 11F.X.HO.Dm

8F.Y.HO.Dm and 5F.Y.R1.Dn commented on the tone of the emails saying that it revealed cultural differences between the current organisation and a public sector organisation they previously worked in. 5F.Y.R1.Dn went on to describe how a welcome email from their line manager elicited a flurry of friendly responses from people they hadn't previously met. Two participants noted the importance of formal organisational practices such as a fortnightly information sharing session and a quarterly directorate meeting as contributing to OA.

In answer to a probing question following their answer to the questions about things that helped or hindered their understanding of organisational culture, 2M.Y.HO.Dn elaborated on how communication played a role.

**Interviewer:** *“It's interesting that you mentioned communication, the daily communication over there. Would it be formal or informal communication?”*

*"I would say it's a mixture of both, because obviously there would be formal meetings like the team catch-up meetings, where in the beginning it was very confusing, and it does feel like you're just kind of thrown into the deep end at the very start, but then there are more informal approaches as well, where the team members would just come up to you one-on-one and would ask you to do a small task here, a small task there. And then you kind of start getting a feel of what the overall process is from just getting these small jigsaw puzzle pieces almost and then arranging them in a logical sense, and you can start seeing the patterns of the work being organised."*

- 2M.Y.HO.Dn

These findings are in keeping with research into organisational communication, which identifies effective communication practices as essential for facilitating cultural change and highlights the role on leadership communication in shaping and transmitting OC (Jablin and Putnam, 2008). Other studies examining the relations between organisational identification and communication found that a positive communication climate enhanced employees' identification with OC and fostered a sense of belonging and alignment with organisational values (Smidts et al., 2001). While email was not a new introduction, its use as a social tool to virtually introduce oneself to new team members seemed to have acted as a conduit of OC to new starters at the organisation.

In terms of application, this highlights the importance of both having robust internal communication strategies and encouraging informal communication and collaboration networks, to reinforce organisational values in a less formal setting as well as examine the extent to which technology aids or hampers OA.

#### **5.1.3.4 Need for organic encounters to learn and share knowledge**

Respondents expressed a desire for more opportunities to meet and network, with one respondent expressing that informal access to colleagues at the initial stages of work would be beneficial:

*"I think that was largely probably more to do with the fact that there was hybrid working, and people are at the receiving end of emails, rather than having the ability to go over to their pod or to a focus room and have a number of different handovers with different people. Certainly, in the*

*initial stages it wasn't hybrid working not working, but not having access to your colleagues in person for those kinds of informal contacts was definitely challenging.*

- 9M.X.HO.IDn

-

6F.Y.R2.IDn discussed the benefits of having informal, non-work-related conversations:

*“Every Thursday (the team is) booked for one hour and you are not allowed to mention anything to do at work and it's been fantastic. So, to me that's another way that the organisation is thinking that we've new people in the team here that work out of the (R2) office, and the rest of the team are all really in Dublin, so it doesn't be a lot of time so you're actually with them in person. So, to me, that's another indication of that sort of culture.”*

- 6F.Y.R2.IDn

Communication and technology were both seen to play a role in OC, particularly around the shift to remote and hybrid working, with a Microsoft study analysing communication patterns of their employees during the first 6 months of remote working in 2020 reporting that collaboration networks became more static, a finding replicated by Emanuel et al. (2023), who found this issue to be particularly affecting women and people in the early stages of their career.

While this study did not reveal gender differences in the effect of hybrid working on communication and collaboration, a more positivist instrument, applied more widely, such as the Denison Culture Survey, that has organisational learning and coordination and integration as subscales, may reveal more detailed insights across genders, departments and roles in the organisation.

#### **5.1.4 Hybrid environments may facilitate the development of microcosms of organisational culture**

Three participants commented on the fragmenting effect of hybrid working on OC. While this theme was not discussed by a sizable number of participants, the researcher chose to include it, owing to its importance to the area of study and potential impact on the efficacy of the organisation. While all three participants noted an impact on organisational culture, all three participants had different views on why and how this happened. One participant believed that individual teams could develop unique cultures, and this is driven by managers and team members who have been in the team for long. They believed that a lessening of cross-departmental interaction and therefore reinforcement of OC from outside the team, owing to hybrid working, placed more emphasis on the role of the line manager and longer-serving team members in defining and setting team culture. As discussed in section 5.1.3.1, leadership plays a pivotal role in setting and maintaining OC. Insufficient access to executive level leadership may also contribute to a more differentiated manifestation of OC in different teams.

Another participant saw this differentiation in culture between teams as naturally occurring. They discussed group effects and siloing, and saw this as arising out of human nature, scaling pressures and difference in leadership approaches from the executive leadership tier, confirming that while they did not see hybrid working as causative, they saw it as contributory. In response to what causes siloing in the organisation, the participant said,

*“I think there's a couple of things. Firstly, I think it's human nature. And I think there's also through the role distinctions, as we grow bigger, the amount of specialisation increases and increases and increases, but if you don't, if you're not very careful about keeping the small team culture, and everybody does a bit of everything and understands a bit of everything, I think it's much easier for those silos to grow.*

*And I think it's great we have some directors, one in particular, who I would have heard is a hard charger. I think that pressure is felt by the people in the directorate. And that can cause people to shortcut and to steamroll over or avoid or whatever.”*

Schein (2010) saw subcultures as a natural outcome of an organisation's growth and need to differentiate themselves based on functional, geographical, market, product or hierarchical units, seeing a critical function of leadership as being its ability to recognise the cultural consequences of this differentiation, with the leaders' task being to find ways of coordinating and aligning these subcultures. Given the small number of participants from regional offices, an in-depth exploration of cultural differences based on office location could not be undertaken, however, as noted in section 5.1.2, participants from regional offices reported more congruence between espoused and enacted values.

A third participant theorised that hybrid working created a completely different culture:

*"I imagine actually (that it is) the hybrid working environment that creates a culture of its own really, because it's not so much just being stuck in the office, because it doesn't feel so much as a routine."*

While 2M.Y.HO.Dn felt that hybrid work created a different culture overall, there is little evidence of this in current literature, which hitherto has focused on the impact of remote work on employee wellbeing and employee engagement (Rahmi and Cucuani, 2021), productivity (Sivaprakash and Venkatesh, 2023), the role of trust and communication in organisational culture in remote working environments (van Zoonen et al., 2023), and the transmission of culture in virtual environments (Asatiani et al., 2020), but not specifically on the evolution or emergence of new OC as a result of hybrid or remote working.

In terms of switching behavioural patterns when working from a remote environment and an in-person one, there is some evidence from cross-cultural studies that report that individuals may adopt the cultural values of the mainstream culture in the public domain but follow the values of their heritage culture in the private domain (Karim, 2021). Exploring this dynamic in an organisational context, whereby individuals align more closely with OC at the office, but exhibit behaviours influenced by individual differences or ecological factors when working remotely is a

promising area for future research and may have implications for OC, particularly around reimagining how organisational norms, values and behaviours are translated and maintained in a hybrid or remote working environment.

## **5.2 Conclusion**

While current literature addresses some aspects of the four themes discussed above, there remains a need for more comprehensive studies that examine OA over the lifecycle of the employee, as well as the long-term effects and evolution of OA and OC in hybrid work environments, with more work to be done to address the theoretical gap in integrating the concepts of OA and OC to develop a nuanced understanding of acculturation, particularly in the changing organisational environment brought about by hybrid and remote work.

In the next section, this paper discusses the findings of this study within the context of wider literature and considers its practical implications for organisations, leaderships and human resources.

## 6. Discussion

The previous chapter detailed the findings from this research study, identifying key themes from the interview data on participants' experience of the OA process. This chapter discusses those findings in relation to this study's objectives, situating these findings within the broader literature on acculturation, interpreting them within the context of the research objectives, examining how they align with or diverge from extant literature, addressing limitations and suggesting areas for future research. This study had 5 objectives; each objective is aligned with a corresponding sub-question discussed in section 3.

### 6.1: Objectives

#### **Objective 1: To examine the existing OA process within the organisation**

As discussed in the previous section, four themes emerged from the data, with each contributing to the understanding of how OA occurred in the organisation and to the development of a phased model of OA. The first two themes focused on OA in general, whereas the last two themes revealed insights specific to OA in hybrid environments.

The first theme revealed a 3 phased process: initial impression formation about the company, information seeking and an Experiential Phase, wherein the new starter came into direct contact with the organisation and the OA experience is modulated throughout by factors unique to the individual, such as professional antecedents and personality factors. Parallels are found in Douglas' (2017) Staged Adaptation Model of Organisational Culture, where she found 6 stages of adaption starting with the pre-entry stage, characterised by expectations regarding organisational culture, similar to this study's Impression Phase. She also identified what she termed as the alert stage, the establishing stage, the self stage and the belonging stage, extending from month 1 to month 12 of the employee's tenure in the organisation, culminating in the assimilation stage, seen to occur from month 12 onwards.

While Douglas' model looks at new starters over a longer period of time, it does not comment on the generative and iterative nature of OA, which is the second theme that emerged from this

study. This theme revealed that OA is iterative as employees' experience of OC changes, either owing to forming a more nuanced understanding of OC over time or their role in the company. A search of current literature on acculturation did not reveal similar findings, the closest theories being those emerging out of cross-cultural psychology such as Matsumoto and Juang's (2023) findings, which hold that acculturation is a cumulative process through which employees build on their previous experience with cultural adaptation, as well as the Integrative Acculturation Model, which posits that acculturation is a process whereby individuals continuously adapt and balance multiple cultural identities; describing integration as an ongoing process of negotiation between cultures (Garcia et al., 2020).

The third theme revealed the importance of interpersonal interactions and relationships in relation to OA processes, indicating that some factors may carry a higher weightage than others in terms of OC transmission, particularly in a hybrid environment. As discussed in section 5.1.3.1., extant literature on OC and organisational effectiveness sees leaders playing a crucial role in achieving organisational success (Bass and Avolio, 1993; Ogbonna and Harris, 2000) through setting the initial culture of the organisation (Schein, 2010). Individuals' teams are seen as mutually reinforcing organisational culture, with Tajfel and Turner (1979) finding that feelings of belonging are based on similarities to the group. Espousing and exhibiting values and behaviour similar to the group, therefore, results in feelings of belonging. This is supported by person culture fit theories, which posit that teams made up of individuals with similar values, perform better, however, contrary to this conclusion, (Fay et al., 2006, cited in Arnold and Randall et al., 2010) found a strong correlation between diverse teams and high performance.

The fourth theme revealed that OC is not static or uniform throughout the organisation. These findings are closely aligned to findings from cross-cultural research, where acculturation was seen to follow multiple trajectories (Syed and Juang, 2018) across major components with Schwartz et al. (2020) finding that acquisition and maintenance of culture may not be homogenous across its various components, suggesting the plurality of multiple cultural identities (Karim, 2021).

Further research will be required to see how generalisable these findings are. There is scope for extending this theory, however, it would need to be tested and developed further by including data from other organisations, possibly through focus group discussions with employees at various stages in their career and with various tenures in their organisations. The model could be operationalised to be used as a diagnostic tool.

### **Objective Two: To investigate hybrid working practices**

Most respondents said they followed the mandated work pattern with two in-office days, one a departmental day and the other a day that suited them. There was some variation with one respondent choosing to come in every day, as they were accustomed to this work pattern in previous roles, another opting to work out of two different offices, the head office and regional office 2, and a third working on-site (in locations external to the office) in lieu of office days. There seemed to be some degree of flexibility, with one respondent noting that they felt that the process was not closely monitored, another adding that they did not feel micromanaged and a third noting that the process seemed to operate on trust.

Trust is an organisational value, and employees reported feeling trusted to follow the hybrid working policy. This observation aligns with the literature on organisational trust, which sees it impacting performance, employee and job satisfaction and a knowledge sharing culture (Al Hawari, 2012). Trust is also found to be related to the construct of psychological safety (Frazier et al., 2017; Edmondson, 2004). Psychological safety is defined as an environment wherein people feel free to express their thoughts and feelings without fear of negative repercussions (Edmondson, 1999) and was found to be positively correlated with innovation (Baer and Frese, 2002), team performance (Edmondson, 2002) and learning behaviours (Edmondson, 1999). Leadership behaviour (Nembhard and Edmondson, 2009), team interactions (Carmeli and Gittel, 2008) and organisational culture (Schein, 1992) were found to impact psychological safety. This finding points to the importance of maintaining flexible and trust-based hybrid working policies to achieve optimal outcomes.

### **Objective Three: To explore employees' experience with hybrid working in relation to its impact on the recognition and acquisition of OC.**

Findings were in line with Giorgi et al.'s (2015) theory that OC comprises symbolic and pragmatic elements, as respondents identified symbolic elements (such as induction, learning and development focus, formal knowledge sharing meetings, the buddy system, organisational policies) and implicit elements (such as experiences with their team, observations around leadership behaviour and communication) as contributing to their understanding and adoption of OC. Interestingly, more attention was paid to the pragmatic elements of OC, alluding to the importance of alignment between these elements. Parallels can be seen with Schein's Three Layers of Organisational Culture, which conceptualised OC as having 3 levels. Artifacts are the visible, tangible elements of the culture, which includes company policies, the physical environment and, in the modern workplace, its digital environment. Espoused values are stated values and rules of behaviour, and finally Basic Underlying Assumptions are deeply ingrained beliefs and values that operate unconsciously and influence employees' perceptions, thoughts and feelings about work (Schein, 2010). Alignment of these layers was seen to play a role in organisational effectiveness with misalignment seen to negatively impact employee engagement (Simons, 2002).

Contrary to Asatiani et al.'s (2020) findings that misalignment between OC's symbolic and pragmatic elements could occur in virtual environments, 10 respondents noted alignment between their expectations of OC and their experience in the organisation, with the 11<sup>th</sup> noting overall alignment with some differences noted in how values were expressed by executive level management as they spent more time in their role, and the 12<sup>th</sup> respondent noting a preponderance of subcultures driven by mid-level management and longer tenured colleagues. This perception of high alignment could be because respondents were fairly new to the organisation or could arise from social desirability bias, given that the interviewer was a member of the HR team. Alternatively, it could suggest that a blend of 3 remote and 2 in-office days are sufficient for alignment between symbolic and pragmatic elements to take place. Future research could focus on strategies and work patterns that maintain cultural alignment in hybrid working settings.

#### **Objective Four: To identify challenges and benefits**

Consistent with existing literature on hybrid models, respondents noted several benefits, including inclusion, flexibility and autonomy. One respondent noted that hybrid work took the stress off managing a chronic health condition and three others noted a positive impact in mental and physical health. Ten respondents saw benefits to work-life balance and six saw benefits to the organisation, such as access to a wider pool of talent.

Similar to the findings of Leonardi et al. (2013), respondents noted communication and collaboration challenges. Six respondents discussed communication challenges, expressing uncertainty around communication protocols and contacting colleagues when working remotely. While only three respondents explicitly reported collaboration being negatively impacted by hybrid working, five expressed difficulties around knowledge sharing and six found it harder to establish interpersonal connections, both being factors that enhance collaboration.

These findings point to a need for developing clear communication protocols for hybrid working, so new starters know how and when to contact colleagues. This also highlights the need for the development of intuitive knowledge repositories and knowledge networks that allow employees to access procedural, contextual and collective knowledge. Finally, these findings highlight the need to create opportunities for informal virtual and in-person meetings that help foster interpersonal connections between employees. Future research could include longitudinal studies to assess the long-term impact of hybrid working on inclusion and employee health, examining whether these benefits persist over time. Other research could include measuring the efficacy of interventions such as knowledge networks or activities that enhance interpersonal connections.

**Objective Five: To provide recommendations for enhancing acculturation in hybrid work environments.**

While research into organisational socialisation sees it as learning processes (Saks and Ashforth, 1997) that take place through formal orientation and training programmes, (Bauer et al., 2007) formal acculturative processes such as induction, the probation process, directorate meetings and employee focus groups were mentioned by a few participants, but not discussed at length, with the exception of the buddy system (a peer learning and onboarding strategy, where a new

starter is paired with a colleague to help them acclimatise to the new company, their role being to guide, support and answer questions during their initial 6 months in the organisation), and InfoSolves (cross-departmental meetings, where departments present their work to other departments to share information and insights and promote a more cohesive, collaborative and integrated work environment).

As discussed in the previous section, a need for interventions that address collaboration and communication gaps was identified as a factor that could enhance OA in a hybrid working environment. Responses to the question, “What actions, strategies or initiatives would, in your opinion, support the effective recognition and acquisition of OC in a hybrid working environment?” further revealed the importance of leadership and line management for OA in a hybrid environment, pointing to a need for specific support given to these levels of employees around value-based leadership. Two respondents expressed a continued need for a focus on culture, and one respondent suggested that more work needs to be done in calling out behaviours not aligned with organisational values coupled with opportunities to share, reward and celebrate good examples of the values being demonstrated. This indicates a need for more work to be done around leadership development, employer branding for internal stakeholders, and for a rewards and recognition framework to be developed around organisational values.

## **6.2 Conclusion**

The overall research question for this research project was whether hybrid work impacts OA in new starters in the civil service. The findings of this study shed light on the multidimensional, multiphased and iterative nature of OA in which hybrid work affects the speed and extent at which some contributory factors are experienced and understood. It reveals a need for thoughtful strategies to address gaps in communication, collaboration, knowledge sharing, interpersonal connections and cultural reinforcement, combined with a need to develop leadership competencies in order to support better OA and overall organisational effectiveness in hybrid environments. The next section explores recommendations on ways in which to achieve this.

## 7. Recommendations

This section offers recommendations that emerged from the findings and discussions in the preceding sections, which aim to enhance the acculturation process in hybrid work environments. A strategic approach to enhancing OA is proposed through the development of a competency framework to act as a guide for leadership, activities around reinforcing OC, and creating networks for interpersonal connection and interdepartmental collaboration. These recommendations, including their financial implications, are discussed below.

### 7.1. Leadership Development

#### 7.1.1. Developing a Competency Framework

In keeping with findings from other studies, leadership was found to have a big impact on OA. This study recommends developing a leadership competency framework based on organisational values to act as a blueprint for leadership behaviour and decision making. **Defining core leadership competencies** at different leadership levels, provides new starters with a clear pathway towards OA. It further provides a clear, structured approach that ensures consistency across all leadership levels, and when combined with a robust learning and development programme, equips leaders with the skills and behaviours needed to improve organisational performance. Finally, these competencies could be aligned with performance management tools to develop a culture of accountability around upholding and promoting organisational values.

#### 7.1.2. Learning and Development

Effective leadership plays a role in embedding and sustaining OC. Ensuring leaders have the knowledge and skills to model and drive cultural alignment and reinforce desired behaviours, is an important way through which OA can be enhanced, especially in new starters, who look to their line managers and senior leaders for behavioural cues, particularly when they first start work in a new role. This study recommends instituting a learning and development programme that ensures:

**(1) Awareness of organisational policies and procedures** pertaining to a managerial role, such as a performance management policy, complaints policy, etc. Pre-recorded tutorials available on the intranet that new managers can access, and live refreshers offered on a hybrid basis on topics such as performance management when mid-year and end-of-year reviews are due. A suite of such training can be developed for new managers as part of their induction into their new role.

**(2) Focused leadership skills development**, such as value-based decision making and communication. Inclusive leadership practices and emotional intelligence that aim at developing self-awareness, that align leadership training programmes with core values, are another way in which OA could be enhanced through good leadership practices. While some training can take place in-house, external subject matter experts may be required. A list of required training would need to be compiled, and a single vendor could be procured to deliver all training. Alternatively, given the breadth of training topics, individual training providers could be procured. Pricing varies significantly depending on topic, class size and mode of delivery, with prices ranging from EUR 1500 to EUR 6500 for online group training for topics that do not involve testing and certification. These usually have a per-head price that varies depending on the topic and nature of the certification.

**(3) Access to mentors and coaches** through mentorship programmes and access to a coaching panel may be offered. This provides personalised strategies to address challenges that individual leaders may face. Mentors could be drawn from the organisation, or the programme could be extended to other civil service organisations that have similar values.

A coaching panel could be set up, with the panel previously vetted to ensure value-based alignment. Coaching sessions are usually chargeable per hour and vary from between EUR 150 to EUR 500 per hour.

## 7.2. Reinforcement of OC

### 7.2.1. Employer Branding and Value-Based Hiring

Findings regarding the phased nature of OA revealed that potential employees were making assumptions about OC prior to interviewing for a role. Organisations are aware of this and leverage the concept of **employer branding** to stand out in the labour market and attract talent (CIPD, 2023b). This study reveals that OA is iterative, as employees' experience of OC changes based on role and experiences in the organisation, and therefore proposes that employer branding extends beyond its use as a talent acquisition tool to one that could potentially be used to reinforce OC in the initial stages by ensuring **value-based hiring**, which focuses on aligning new hires with the core values of the organisation and cultural fit rather than solely hiring based on skills and experience. This can be achieved by aligning employer branding messages, OC and recruitment processes. The organisation has a marketing and communications department, and support could be leveraged from there.

Of note is the finding that misalignment between employer branding and actual employee experience leads to decreased organisational commitment, lower job satisfaction and higher turnover intent (Barrow and Mosley, 2015). This brings us to the next recommendation, the need for ongoing reinforcement, recognition and reward of OC.

### 7.2.2. Reinforcing, Recognising and Rewarding OC

Turning employer branding inward as a tool through which OC can be reinforced through **consistent communication** at induction and onboarding (Cameron and Quinn, 2020), team and departmental meetings, newsletters and internal communications, are some of the ways in which OA can be supported and OC strengthened (Schein, 2010). It also provides an internal reminder around organisational values and terms of engagement.

Cultural values may be embedded into the **performance management** process, where performance appraisal feedback could include examples of how employees are exhibiting behaviours that align with organisational values (Kotter and Heskett, 1992). **Formal recognition programmes**, where peers and managers could acknowledge employees who exemplify organisational values, could be instituted. There are a number of apps available such as Nectar,

which charges \$6 per user per month with a minimum annual amount of \$4000 and a peer-to-peer feedback platform, Motivosity, which charges a minimum of \$3000 per annum, but does not list per person charges on its website. Bespoke systems may be developed; however, pricing would vary greatly depending on the features and ongoing support required. Existing tools such as MS Forms could be used to collect nominations and applications for awards.

Finally, **feedback and continuous improvement** may be encouraged through surveys and focus groups and regular assessments such as standardised OC polls, culture audits and employee satisfaction surveys may be used to inform further improvement.

### 7.3. Connection and Collaboration

Fostering connection and collaboration in a hybrid environment presents unique challenges, which require intentional strategies to ensure connection, engagement and collaboration, particularly among new starters. This study found that OA takes place through the observation of fellow employees. It also found that a hybrid working environment exacerbates cultural differences between teams. This indicates that exposure to the wider organisation is important, particularly for new starters. The first step would be **clarifying communication protocols** with new starters, so they are comfortable approaching teammates when working remotely, using MS Teams. While the buddy system is already in place, as are regular team and departmental meetings, new-starter networks could foster interpersonal relationships across departments and geographical locations.

While fortnightly InfoSolves, Directorate Days and company-wide social events are being held, more work needs to be done around establishing clear expectations around communication on the individual level. This is linked to point 7.1.2. around the reinforcement, recognition and reward of OC mediated behaviours. **Skills networks** could be established, where employees could either access support or share knowledge and expertise around common areas such as data analytics or communications. **Employee interest focus groups** (e.g. around health and wellbeing and social activities) could also be established. While most of this involves a time investment

from employees, occasional external supports could be included, such as external subject matter experts, motivational speakers, etc. Annual budgets for these activities would need to be set.

## **7.4 Conclusion**

These recommendations provide a strategic roadmap that not only benefits OA, but has far-reaching effects on leadership, OC and organisational performance. Integrating these recommendations could create a cohesive and collaborative environment where OC is on display and reinforced through training, policies and practices, contributing to a smoother and more effective OA process.

## 8. Conclusion

This research aimed to ascertain whether OA is impacted by hybrid working. Based on a qualitative analysis of 12 semi-structured interviews, undertaken on new starters in a civil service organisation, four themes emerged. The first theme indicated that OA took place in three phases; an Impression Phase, an Information Seeking Phase and an Experiential Phase, with early phases commencing before formal employment begins. The second theme indicated that OA was iterative, with new starters reframing their understanding of OC over time based on their experiences and interactions in the organisation. This raises the question of whether OA is an ongoing process that extends beyond the early six-month period that this research studies. The third theme emphasised the importance of interpersonal interactions as imperative for OA in hybrid environments, particularly those involving leadership and other team members, as OA seemed to take place through observational and experiential learning. Technologically mediated communications were also seen as reflective of OC. Finally, hybrid environments were found to facilitate microcosms of culture that varied by team and department, exacerbated in part by limited cross-team and interdepartmental interactions that hybrid environments may be prone to. It was, however, also seen as a natural part of the scaling process in a growing organisation.

The findings of the first two themes emphasise the importance of employer branding and consistent communication to ensure alignment between the first two phases. To ensure that employees' experience (phase three) aligns with their expectations (phases one and two), leadership development combined with creating opportunities that enable the building of interpersonal networks through skills networks and employee interest focus groups, is recommended.

While the generalisability of the study was limited by its focus on a single organisation, it proposed a clear model of how OA takes place and how hybrid environments affect this process. It also confirmed the importance of leadership on OA (Schein, 2010) and contributed towards conceptualising and operationalising a multidimensional model of acculturation (van de Vijver, 2015), confirming the simultaneous existence of cultures, sub-cultures and hybrid cultures beyond mainstream cultures (Martin and Shao, 2016) in an organisational context. Future research could test this model on other organisations. Other studies could explore the iterative nature of OA throughout the employees' lifecycle.

## 9. Personal Learning Statement

Undertaking a master's research project as a mature student was an insightful experience. As a lifelong learner and a learning and development professional, I have consistently engaged in the learning process, however, revisiting the process as a part time student working a full-time role, has made it possible for me to observe changes in how I approach learning, how the research process has evolved technologically and methodologically and how my approach and these changes interact. These topics are discussed below.

Choice of the initial research area (OA), as well as decisions on the final research topic, were motivated by practical application and professional relevance in keeping with andragogical research, which suggests that adult learners prefer drawing on their experience and apply learning to real-world situations. Topic choice was driven by a desire to do something relevant not only to current literature, but also something that would benefit the organisation I work in, where findings were something, I could apply in my role in learning and development. I joined the organisation during a period of growth that is expected continue into 2025. Conversations around ensuring organisational systems and processes scale to support this growth, is what drew me to this topic.

Methodologically, I could see that more robust thematic models had been developed, making them easier to apply. Technologically, using auto-transcription saved manhours, however, the tactile exercise of manual transcription, that seems to engage with deeper cognitive processes of memory and multimodal learning, may be impacted. I think the trade-off was justified, because this was not a memory exercise, but one of analysis.

The research process was revealing from the perspective of how I learn and work and what I enjoy. I approached my dissertation as I would a work project, creating a Gantt chart to schedule work and monitor progress. What was missing from the process was collaborating with and reporting to other stakeholders, something I found I needed to keep me on track. Regular supervision meetings helped in this regard. Another benefit of these meeting was the ability to exercise self-reflection, which was beneficial to the research process, but also provided

opportunities to articulate and refine my ideas, evaluate my work and problem-solve on an ongoing basis.

This process has allowed me to observe shifts in how I approach the learning and research process. Besides giving me insight into my own personal growth, strengths and limitations in relation to my approach to research, this reflection has highlighted the broader evolution of these processes over time.

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# Appendices

## Appendix 1: Research Plan – Gantt Chart



## Appendix 2: Invitation Email

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Invitation to participate in a research study

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Dear <Participant>,

I am in the process of completing a Master's in Human Resource Management and I am working on my research project. I am interested in how hybrid/blended working impacts the way in which new employees acquire OC (shared values, beliefs and assumptions that influence employee behaviour) and I would love to talk to you about your experience in SEAI so far. Would you consider participating? The study is taking place with authorisation from [REDACTED] Head of HR and [REDACTED], Director – [REDACTED]

Participation would involve taking part in one 60-minute interview, which will be completed virtually. An audio/video file and transcript of the interview will be generated, and the audio/video file will be deleted once the transcript is reviewed. No one, other than I, will have access to the audio/video file. Basic demographic data will be collected. All information will be confidential, and you will not be identified. Data you provide will be anonymised and may be used in future academic presentations and publications about this study. Participation is voluntary and you may withdraw at any time and will not be required to provide a reason.

Participating in the study should provide an excellent opportunity to reflect on your experience in your new role to date. Understanding the effects of how employees acquire OC in a hybrid environment would help us design more effective onboarding and induction processes that are specifically created for hybrid environments. If you'd like to participate, please let me know and let me know what your availability for interview is like over the next two weeks.

## Appendix 3: Consent Form

### CONSENT FORM

I, the undersigned, declare that I am willing to take part in research for the project entitled, "The Impact of Hybrid Working on Organisational Acculturation – A Multidimensional Approach." I declare that:

- I have been fully briefed on the nature of this study and my role in it and have been given the opportunity to ask questions before agreeing to participate.
- The nature of my participation has been explained to me, and I have full knowledge of how the information collected will be used.
- I am aware that my participation in this study will be audio/video recorded and I agree to this.
- I am aware that should I feel uncomfortable at any time, I can request that the recording software be switched off.
- I am aware that such information may also be used in future academic presentations and publications about this study.
- I fully understand that there is no obligation on me to participate in this study, participation is voluntary, and I am free to withdraw my participation at any time without having to give a reason.
- I acknowledge that the researcher guarantees that they will not use my name or any other information, that would identify me in any outputs of the research.









Signature of the Participant

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of the Researcher

Date \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix 4: Demographic Questions

Demographics	Demographics
<p>1. Please enter your name  (Optional)</p> <p>Enter your answer</p>	<p>5. Have you worked in the public sector previously? </p> <p><input type="radio"/> Yes</p> <p><input type="radio"/> No</p>
<p>2. Please enter your age in years </p> <p>Enter your answer</p>	<p>6. Have you worked in a role that was fully remote previously? </p> <p>A fully remote role is a role where in you did not have to travel into an office location at all.</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Yes</p> <p><input type="radio"/> No</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Unsure</p>
<p>3. Please enter your gender </p> <p><input type="radio"/> Male</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Female</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Prefer not to say</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Other</p>	<p>7. Are you directly employed by </p> <p><input type="radio"/> Yes,  is my employer</p> <p><input type="radio"/> No, I work for an agency</p> <p><input type="radio"/> No, I am an external researcher</p> <p><input type="radio"/> No, I am a consultant</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Unsure</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Other</p>
<p>4. How long have you been working in the organisation? </p> <p>Please answer in number of months.</p> <p>Enter your answer</p>	

## Appendix 5: Interview Guide – Draft 1

### Research Question

**Main Question: Does hybrid work impact organisational acculturation in new entrants to the Irish Civil service?**

**Sub-question 1: What are the factors that influence the acquisition of OC in new entrants to the Civil service?**

Interview Questions:

1. In your own words, what do you understand by the term OC?
2. What are some of the ways in which you can recognise what the culture of an organisation is?
3. How would you describe the organisation's culture?
  - Did this align with your expectations?
4. Can you describe your experience adapting to the organisation's culture?
5. What factors, influenced your understanding and adoption of the organisation's culture?
6. Have you faced any challenges in understanding or adapting to the organisation's culture?
7. How do you see your relationship with the organisation's culture change or evolve over time?
8. What role to you see yourself playing in shaping or influencing the organisation's culture?

**Sub-question 2: How are hybrid working practices implemented within the organisation?**

Interview Questions:

9. Can you describe the current hybrid working arrangements in your organisation?

**Sub-question 3: What are the experiences and perceptions of new entrants in relation to hybrid working, particularly around the impact of hybrid working on employees recognising and acquiring OC.**

Interview Questions:

10. Can you talk me through the ways in which hybrid working impacted has you?
11. In terms of recognising OC, how has hybrid working impacted this process?
12. Could you describe what you think the impact of hybrid working has been on the acquisition of OC?
13. If you have worked in non-hybrid role previously, have you observed any differences in the way you recognise and acquire OC.

**Sub-question 4: What are the potential benefits and drawbacks of hybrid working in relation to the acculturation process?**

Interview Questions:

14. What do you think are the main benefits hybrid working has afforded you?
15. What do you think are the main challenges you have encountered, owing to hybrid working?

**Sub-question 5: Does the study identify recommendations for policies, practices and strategies that support effective acculturation in hybrid working environments?**

Interview Questions:

16. Based on your experience, what are some of the current challenges you think new entrants face in recognising and acquiring OC in our hybrid working environment?
17. What actions, strategies or initiatives, in your opinion, would support the effective recognition and acquisition of OC in a hybrid working environment?

## Appendix 6: Interview Guide – Final Version

1. How would you describe the organisation's culture?  
Does this align with your expectations?
2. What factors, influenced your understanding and adoption of the organisation's culture?
3. Can you describe the current hybrid working arrangements in your organisation?
4. Could you describe what you think the impact of hybrid working has been on the acquisition of OC?
5. What do you think are the main benefits hybrid working has afforded you?
6. What do you think are the main challenges you have encountered, owing to hybrid working?
7. Based on your experience, what are some of the current challenges you think new entrants face in recognising and acquiring OC in our hybrid working environment?
8. What actions, strategies or initiatives, in your opinion, would support the effective recognition and acquisition of OC in a hybrid working environment?
9. Is there anything else you'd like to add or say in relation to the acquisition of organizational culture in a hybrid environment?

## Appendix 7: Interview Script

### Interview Script

Thank you for participating in this study. Before we begin, I'd like to tell you a little bit more about the study. I'm interested in organisational acculturation which means that I'm interested in finding out how OC is acquired. Specifically, the study will be looking at how OC is acquired in a hybrid working environment. OC is defined as shared values, beliefs and assumptions that influence how employees behave in an organisation. And when I talk about hybrid working environments, I mean environments where you can work from a remote location on some days and from the office on others. This is also sometimes called blended working.

You would have received a demographic form and consent form for me. The demographics are used for 2 things. They're research data but also, they help contextualise and anonymise participants for the reader.

Also, in terms of confidentiality this interview will be recorded, and a transcript will be autogenerated. The audio/visual recording will be deleted once the transcripts are checked. If you feel uncomfortable at any time, you can ask that the recording be switched off.

Some of the information you provide will be used in my thesis. It may also be used in future academic presentations and publications about this study, however our name or other information that may directly identify you, will not be used.

Participation is voluntary and you're free to withdraw your participation at any time.